

LONDON SOCIETY.

OCTOBER 1880.

AMONG THE HEATHER.

CHAPTER I.

'She charmed my heart, and aye sinsyne
I couldna' think on any ither.
By sea and sky she shall be mine,
The bonnie lass among the heather.'

GLOVER.

THE top of the long hill was gained, the avenue-gate entered, a short drive, and Norah Grant was safely landed at Robin Lodge, county Ross-shire, country Scotland.

So you are introduced to my heroine. But just as you could not, with politeness, scan too closely a lady presented to you in your own drawing-room, so do not stare Miss Grant out of countenance now; you shall see her, and know her better, presently, when her travelling garments and some of the journey's marks have been removed together.

No welcome could have been warmer than young Mrs. Ross's, no room could have been more cosy than that to which she led her guest, no armchair could have been more tempting than the one Norah was pushed into; finally, no cup of tea is ever so refreshing as that blessed cup presented by a friendly hand after a long and tedious journey.

What a large part 'common-places' play in our every-day lives! We cannot meet even our dearest friend after a long absence with-

out launching first into small talk, carefully abstaining from the subjects which really most interest us, till the weather, &c., have been carefully worked off, anxiously descanted on.

So Miss Grant, whilst sipping her tea, bravely made her way through subjects in which she took no sort of interest, and not till cup No. 2 did she and Fanny Ross become once more on last year's friendly and confidential footing.

'Percival Leicester is here just now,' quoth little Mrs. Ross.

'O!' from the depths of the easy-chair, in by no means a pleased and interested tone.

'Now, Norah, don't make up your mind beforehand to be stiff and—excuse me—uncivil. There is no need, and Percival Leicester is by no means to be despised,' and Mrs. Ross shook her head at the young lady opposite, who remained perfectly unmoved, and answered demurely,

'It's just as well I've known you some time, Fanny, my dear, or I might not care to have my manners found fault with so soon after my arrival. I merely said "O," a very harmless expression, I believe. But go on: who else is here?'

'Only an artist friend of Ned's,

a Mr. Lindsay, Geoffrey Lindsay. I hardly know him myself yet, so you must form your own conclusions about him. He is wonderfully kind and good to the children—spoils them, in fact, the little monkeys. Kate Tennant arrives in a day or two, and completes our present party. I often wish the Lodge were larger.'

The gentlemen were all out shooting, so the ladies enjoyed a cosy chat, till they found there was barely time for the business of unpacking and dressing before the dinner-bell would ring; and both hurried up-stairs, Mrs. Ross to her nursery, Norah to her room, refusing all offers of assistance in unpacking. As the young lady bustled about, folding and arranging in independent style, she thought over and made up her mind on one or two subjects connected with the recent fireside conversation. Percival Leicester and she were no strangers to each other. At this time last year, and in this house, they had become acquainted, and Norah had soon classed him as a rich and conceited, good-natured but foppish, young man. Once formed, the opinion was hard to remove. Percival as quickly discovered Miss Grant to be the most attractive, cleverest, sweetest, and most tiresome girl he had ever met. It had once or twice struck him that Norah Leicester might sound better than Norah Grant; but so thought *not* that damsel. The old name had served her comfortably these two-and-twenty years; she desired no other *as yet*, and often spoke gaily of the day when, with a cat or parrot, she should be a happy old maid. Ah, Norah! So matters stood at present, and as she finished the last piece of unpacking and began her evening toilette, Norah quietly decided that, if coolness and snubbing on her

part could teach Percival her feelings towards him, he should have no excuse for not knowing them.

Norah, as she surveyed herself in the long glass before descending, gave a satisfied little nod at the reflection there, and no wonder. It surely is not wrong to feel happy and pleased, when the glass plainly says, 'You are looking very pretty this evening, my dear.' We admire and love a beautiful flower, do we not, as a gift from God? and is not human beauty of a far higher order, a more perfect loveliness? Only remember the flowers must smell sweet too, or their beauty loses half its charms, and the sweetest of them are sometimes the most sober-coloured. But I think Norah smelt sweet too.

The reflection that nodded back at her ~~was~~ was certainly a pleasant one to look on. Fresh, young, light-hearted, a bonnie little lassie, what more could you want? Of middle height, neither stout nor thin, a pretty little figure of Nature's moulding (and the soft muslin set it off to advantage this evening); a well-shaped head, pretty curly brown hair; gray eyes, laughing eyes, but which could look beautifully soft and tender at times; a nose too short for perfect beauty, and just too large a mouth for a critical eye, yet filled with shining white teeth, and you have Norah as I remember her at this time, and want you to imagine her. Just a simple bright little maiden, with as many faults and failings as the rest of us. She 'is all fault who hath no fault at all,' truly.

When she reached the drawing-room, Norah found Mr. Ross there standing by the window, discussing with a gentleman the merits of a sketch the latter held in his hand, and who was introduced to her as Mr. Lindsay. She cast a

furtive glance or two towards him whilst chatting with her host, and altogether thought the first impression a satisfactory one. Tall, manly, brown, with something of the bear about him—the good benevolent bear, I mean; a hairy bear too, for, rather to Norah's sorrow, Geoffrey Lindsay possessed a beard. It suited him, though, she confessed; and no kinder, nicer brown eyes had she ever seen than those which looked down on her as he asked if she recognised the sketch.

'Perfectly: I know that spot well; the stream and bank near the house, and Ben Wyvis in the distance;' and Norah contemplated the clever sketch with interest, while Geoffrey looked with greater pleasure at the pretty living picture by his side, wishing he might draw her just as she stood now, with the evening sun touching the lights and shades of her hair, and resting on the bright sweet face. He always said he was a confirmed bachelor, this Mr. Lindsay, wedded to his paint-brush and palette—a very satisfactory arrangement, no doubt.

The door opened just then, and the before-mentioned Mr. Leicester entered, greeted Norah with *empressment*, and asked a hundred and one questions about her journey, &c.; then sank into a comfortable armchair, which he had first pulled up opposite hers, and looked supremely happy. He was not to be allowed to remain so, however, for in the middle of one of his remarks Norah observed gravely,

'There is a footstool under that table, Mr. Leicester.'

Up bounded the youth, charmed to serve her, brought the stool, and placed it at her feet.

'You don't suppose I need such things, do you, Mr. Leicester?' Norah said, with surprise.

'I merely thought *you* might be the better for one; and you can't imagine how much more comfortable these chairs are with a soft cushion at the back.'

Poor Leicester was once more rushing off to procure one, when a laugh from Mr. Ross, who had stood by much amused, informed him that it was again his and not her own comfort the satirical Norah had been thinking of.

It was too bad of her to tease the poor fellow; but the temptation to do so was always strong on her when she looked at his languishing and sentimental eyes, and noticed his lazy manners.

Fanny came in, dinner was announced immediately, and the rest of the evening passed quickly and pleasantly.

Said Mrs. Ross to her husband in their own room that night,

'I have such a nice plan in my head concerning Norah.'

'A match-making plan, of course, silly woman.'

'Well, and if it is, where is the harm? Ned, *wouldn't* Norah and Mr. Lindsay make a splendid couple?'

'My dear girl, Norah is two-and-twenty, isn't she, and Geoffrey over five-and-thirty? He's old enough to be her—'

'And yet,' observed Mrs. Ross demurely, 'I *do* remember a girl who married, not so very many years ago, a man much older than herself; of course she soon found out her mistake—after it was too late, though.'

Ned stopped his little wife's mouth with kisses.

'Geoffrey and Norah shall marry fifty times over if they please, dearest, and your old husband will aid and abet them to the best of his ability. Will that please you?'

'Thanks, once will be enough,' murmured Fanny as she dropped asleep.

CHAPTER II.

'I said I would die a bachelor.'

SHAKESPEARE.

'No letters till eleven, I suppose,' said Norah, as she entered the dining-room next morning, looking very fresh and trim in her tight-fitting blue serge and pretty ruffles. 'Good-morning, Mr. Ross; good-morning, Mr. Lindsay. What a glorious day! Come and kiss me, Ted, or I won't spread you any bread-and-marmalade.'

'Do you expect letters already, Miss Grant, and only arrived yesterday evening? What indefatigable writers ladies are, to be sure!' laughed Mr. Lindsay.

'No, when I come to consider, I *could* hardly get one yet; but, whether I am expecting any or not, the sound of the postman always gives me *such* a pleasant feeling. That's one of the comforts of living in a town.'

'Discomforts I should call them,' said Mr. Ross, 'but I suppose you feel like Mr. Micawber, that "something *may* turn up." I'm afraid you'll have to wait as long for your letters this year as last, for there is no improvement in that respect, and Ted still waits at the gate at eleven, to act postman up to the house. But here's Fanny, so come to breakfast, good people all. I, for one, am hungry, as I've had half an hour's walk already. It's a perfect morning, I only hope not too bright to last.'

Mr. Leicester had not as yet made his appearance; but no one seemed surprised at that, evidently being well accustomed to the young man's unpunctual ways.

Towards the end of breakfast he came in, marvellously attired in a bright tartan kilt, and looking more like a young Englishman than ever. He made a thousand apologies to Fanny; as, however, they, as well as his unpunctuality, were every-day affairs, she received them very quietly, only asking if he would take tea or coffee.

'What's the order of the day?' asked Mr. Ross, as they finished breakfast. 'Leicester, I see *you're* got up in shooting costume. Lindsay, what will you do, shoot, fish, or sketch? I suspect the ladies won't care to do much to-day, as we must break Miss Grant in by degrees, and not finish her up entirely the first day.'

'Little fear of that,' answered Norah brightly; 'I never felt stronger or better in my life, and am equal to whatever Fanny likes. Don't put me down as a thorough Cockney, please, Mr. Ross.'

'No, I won't, for you don't deserve such treatment, after the plucky ways of last year, when you certainly climbed more like a Scotch than an English girl.'

'Well,' remarked Fanny, 'Norah may soon have a chance of displaying her climbing to a thoroughly English girl, for Kate Tennant arrives on Saturday. She is rather fond of gaiety, I fancy, and has never been in the Highlands before, so I hope she won't find us very dull up here.'

'If she does, she doesn't deserve to come,' laughed Norah. 'Are you going to shoot, Mr. Ross?'

'Yes, Leicester and I will see what we can kill to-day, if you are sure you would prefer a turn at the fish, Lindsay. I'm only afraid it is too bright for them to take well to-day.'

'Never mind; if they don't, I can finish my sketch. I am not quite such an ardent sportsman

as yourself, you know, Ross, and two days like yesterday over the moors are rather more than I care for; so I wish you every luck, and shall potter about at home to-day, I think. Are you "for out" already, Miss Grant, as the good people here say?" as Norah came into the room, after following Teddy up-stairs, to put on her hat for the promised expedition with that young torment.

"Yes, Ted and I arranged a walk yesterday evening, and even settled how long my breakfast was to last," laughed Norah. "No, Mr. Leicester, I'm afraid our walk was to be a *tête-à-tête*," as that gentleman was preparing to offer his company; "you know Ted and I are old friends, and we've such a round of calls to make together, that you would be quite tired out, and, besides, be late for the shooters. We're going first to see 'old Duncan,' she said, turning to Fanny. 'I really have some compunction in showing myself to him; for last year, when I wished him good-bye, he said, "Ah, Miss Nory, may ye soon be safe in Abraham's bosom;" so perhaps he will be disappointed at seeing me still in this vale of tears.'

"I suppose he meant much the same as the Irish do, when they hope "you're bed in heaven may be aisy,"" remarked Mr. Lindsay. "He's a fine old man, that Duncan, and I admire Ted's sense in the bestowal of his friendships; if *only* he could sometimes give a straight answer, he would be perfect."

"Don't expect that," said Norah, "it's not in his constitution; it is a trial, though, particularly if one is in a hurry. Fanny says it comes from their speaking so much Gaelic, where there are no such words as "yes" and "no;" but I think it is a little peculiarity in their organisation which they can't possibly help."

Ted had meanwhile been making frantic signs to Norah from the lawn; so she followed him now, and disappeared down the path leading to the lake. Mr. Leicester watched her depart, and then muttered to himself, "Confound that shooting! I never meant to go out at all to-day; and if the simple fact of wearing a kilt makes them think I mean to shoot, I declare I'll wear black clothes all the rest of my visit;" and he went rather disconsolately to prepare for his expedition.

"Isn't that a dear nice girl?" said Mrs. Ross to Geoffrey as they stood in the window, after Norah had disappeared from view.

"She seems so indeed, and it is certainly a rarity nowadays to find a pretty girl seemingly so unspoilt."

"And really so," said Fanny eagerly, for her love for Norah was very true and warm, and she was never tired of singing her friend's praises; besides, to tell the truth, just at present she had an object in doing so.

"You can't think, Mr. Lindsay," she continued, "what that girl is at home; and that's the place to try character. Ever since her husband's death, Mrs. Grant has had very poor health, and almost all the housekeeping now devolves on Norah (a more difficult task indeed than if she had entire management). They are not very rich, though comfortably off; and yet I am sure that Norah, with her small allowance, does more good than many girls with double the amount. She is never idle, and finds time with all her other duties to help her little sister with her lessons; in fact," added Fanny, "I can't say more than that she is really good—below the surface, I mean—and, as you see, with no prudery."

"A maid who can be merry,
And yet devout at prayer,"

quoted Geoffrey half shyly—'perhaps that's the secret, Mrs. Ross.'

Fanny looked up surprised; as a rule Geoffrey Lindsay was so quiet and self-contained, she hardly expected such words from him, though she liked him all the better for them.

'Yes, I think that *is* just it, Mr. Lindsay; and I speak from experience, for I have known Norah Grant many years now. She has of course, like the rest of us, her own faults, but they lie much on the surface; and I think, among all my friends, I know no girl who would make a better wife to a good husband, some day, than Norah. But when I get on this subject I never know when to stop; so I will run away and order my household, or you will get no dinner to-night, and what would you all say then?' and Mrs. Ross hurried away, well pleased with their little conversation.

Geoffrey stood where she had left him, enjoying the glorious view and delicious air, frosty, as the early mornings so often are by the beginning of September in the Highlands; rather smiling to himself the while, for he thought he understood his kind little hostess's wishes for himself, and this friend she had been praising up to the skies for the last ten minutes, at her busiest time in the morning. But the little woman was so evidently only anxious that those she loved should be as happy as herself (though perhaps these things are better left to arrange themselves), that no one could possibly be offended with her. But Geoffrey was amused; it was still such very early days to think of such a thing. Why, he had been in the house with this Miss Grant barely one day, and though all he had seen of her certainly

attracted him, he felt no inclination to fall in love with her; besides, he was a sworn bachelor, and would in all probability die one; he was getting too old to settle down into married life; and he walked off whistling a verse of a song, the words of which, could Fanny have heard them, would have cast her hopes to the ground.

Geoffrey got his fishing apparatus together, saw the shooters off, and then strolled down towards the lake, on the look-out for Duncan. The Lodge stood on high ground, commanding a lovely view; from the lawn in front a gate led into a thick fir-wood, and walking on through this brought you to the lake. Into this wood Geoffrey sauntered, thinking that he would come some morning early and take a sketch, for the sun was shining through the branches in a way that delighted his artist eye. As he came out of the wood and in sight of the lake he looked about, expecting to see Duncan at his usual occupation of mending the trout-nets; but he was not in sight, and Geoffrey descended to the shore to look for him. As he did so he heard Teddy's clear voice, and, turning round, espied him at a little distance, perched on the keel of a boat Duncan was mending, and Norah leaning against it, chatting to the old man, who looked perfectly happy and pleased. They had their backs to him, and as he came up he overheard Duncan's answer to Norah's last remark.

'Weel, Miss Nory' (he never *could* be induced to call her by her proper name), 'weel, Miss Nory, ye're just aboot richt, an it's no vary frequent a' mak a meestak aboot the waither, far you see, mem, a've bin born an' bred i' the place whatever, an' am maybe pretty flu'nt wi' the aili-

ments; though it's no' for the like o' me to be prood o' that, the Lord be thankit. Still a' do think, Miss Nory, ye need na be feared for the waither the day; far if it doesna' turn shoory, it's pratty shure to be faire.'

'A truly Highland speech,' thought Geoffrey, as he came round to the trio. 'How are you to-day, Duncan? Miss Grant, I didn't expect to find you here yet, but I suppose Ted brought you to see his friend Duncan first thing.'

'Course,' said Ted from his perch, 'Miss Grant wanted to ask about the weather, Mr. Geoff.'

'And have got a very satisfactory answer,' said Norah, looking up with a laugh in her eye. 'I daresay you may have overheard it as you came up, Mr. Lindsay; it has quite set my mind at rest for this day at least;' then raising her voice, for Duncan was very deaf, she said, 'We've been coaxing Duncan to give us a row this afternoon; it's just a day for the water, so still and lovely; and I have not had a row since this time last year, so I long for one.'

'Ay, ay, mem; ye shall have yer row, an' the young gentleman too; an' Donal', he'll just help me clane oot the boat, an' mak it worthy o' ye.'

Norah begged he would not take any trouble about it; and calling rather in haste to Teddy, who she saw was meditating the experiment of a paddle with his boots and stockings on, she told him if they did not go at once they would never be at the gate by eleven.

'You don't know what a lot we have to do this morning, Mr. Lindsay,' she said, turning to him, laughing; 'we've already called on Carlo, but he was out, and we only left cards; and on the large Hen family, who were nearly all at home, but at breakfast,

so it would not have been good manners to stay long and watch them. Now our call on Duncan is finished, and we have still a visit to pay to Mrs. Macintosh, and after that to some pet puppies of Ted's in the stable; so you see we must not waste our time here. Good-bye for the present; come, Teddy.'

Geoffrey watched her retreating figure, thinking to himself what a graceful one it was. It had wisely been left much to Nature to form, and she had been very kind to it, as she usually is when she gets a chance; Norah consequently had a handsome easy figure and a free unconscious carriage—great charms; and so thought Geoffrey, as he turned to arrange about his fishing expedition with old Duncan.

They met again at lunch, when Geoffrey came in rather disappointed at his bad sport; for it was far too bright for the knowing little fish to take. However, he said he would take a turn at his sketch in the afternoon, and make use of the fine weather while it lasted.

'When does your row come off, Miss Grant? is it to be a *tête-à-tête* again with your friend Teddy, or may I be allowed a seat too?'

'You had better ask him,' she answered, with a smile, 'as it is his entertainment; but Milly is coming, and, Fanny, you are going to favour us too, are you not? so I should think you might get permission. Duncan said we might come about four.'

'Then I shall finish my sketch, and join you on the shore at that time, when I shall have earned a row.'

Norah retired to her room after lunch, and wrote diligently for some time. It was not an employment she much cared about—re-

ceiving news was more to her taste; but she knew what a treat letters were to those at home, and how eagerly Madge would look for one from her, and it would not have been like Norah to disappoint her. So she did her duty bravely, and at the appointed time seated herself in the boat, with a clear conscience and light heart. Duncan's services were dispensed with, as Geoffrey would row, and they went lazily up and down, enjoying the delicious evening and glorious view.

Norah was rather quiet; beautiful scenery, like beautiful music, made her disinclined to talk; and as she sat idly letting her hand dip into the water at each movement of the boat, with her pretty gray eyes dreamily fixed on the changing scene, she looked very sweet and simple. As I have said, a great charm about Norah was the entire absence of self-consciousness; and as Geoffrey sat opposite her, lazily pulling them along, he enjoyed *his* view quite as much as she did hers. The children kept up a little chatter between themselves, and Fanny was fully occupied in guarding their movements. Geoffrey felt quite inclined to be quiet too, just then, and they drifted along peacefully for some minutes. Norah roused herself presently, and said, laughing, 'This would soon turn into a Quakers' meeting were it not for the children. Mr. Lindsay, may I take an oar? I tried once or twice last year, and should like to see how much I remember.'

They changed places, and rowed home in a more sociable manner.

On reaching home they found Mr. Ross seated at the tea-table, doing its honours in truly masculine style to himself and Percival Leicester, who was, as usual, reclining in an armchair, listlessly

reading some letters which had arrived during his absence.

'Well, I do call this nice treatment,' remarked Mr. Ross, as the boating-party came in. 'Here are Leicester and I quite done up, expecting a cheerful welcome on our return home, and we find the house perfectly deserted, even the children out, and I am reduced to pouring out the tea—very untidy; disagreeable work it is too.'

'So you seem to have found, Mr. Ross,' said Norah, laughing, and pointing to the tea-cloth. 'I think that poor cloth has got quite as much tea as the cups. Fanny, you are tired. Let me pour out the tea, please do; I like it.'

'If you will be so good, dear, I shall be much obliged, and luxuriate in this armchair a little. Ned, if you wanted to find us at home, pray why did you return so early? It's barely six yet. Had you poor sport?'

'No; pretty good on the whole. But I don't fancy Leicester felt much inclined for it to-day, eh, Leicester?'

'Well, no; I can't say I did exactly. I fancy I was nervous, or something, and found myself constantly wondering what was going on at home,' answered Percival, with a languishing look towards Norah, which, however, she did not see, her attention being wholly given to the tea. Geoffrey came forward to hand the cups, which Percival perceiving, up he jumped, with many apologies for his tardiness; but he was too late, and only received a cool 'thanks' from Norah, and advice to rest after his long day's work, and then she went on with something she was saying to Geoffrey. Percival glanced at the two for a moment, with anything but a pleased expression of countenance, and, saying he had some letters to answer, quitted the room.

'What on earth is the matter with that boy?' asked Mr. Ross, when he was gone. 'He has been about as amiable as two sticks all day. Not brought down one bird, and only brightened up when I proposed returning home; a thing which I was very loth to do, for the birds were splendid—less wild than they have been for days. But I began to be afraid the boy was ill.'

'O, I don't think there is much the matter in that way,' said Fanny. 'He seemed well enough this morning, although I did not think he was very anxious to shoot.'

'Perhaps the kilt does not quite agree with him. I noticed the colours were very bright, and perhaps the green was arsenic,' proposed Norah demurely.

'Miss Grant, don't be so satirical. Why should not this descendant of the Leicesters dress as he chooses?' said Mr. Ross.

'O, by all means,' answered Norah. 'Only it's a pity some "fay" could not "the giftie gie him, to see himself as others see him;" and I hold to my opinion, that none but a Highlander has the right to wear a kilt, and if others do so, why, they deserve to look ill and be laughed at. However, let this particular kilt rest in peace, by all means, and Mr. Leicester may shoot in his dress-suit to-morrow, studs and all, without my remarking on the subject.'

'He won't get the chance, I fear,' said Mr. Ross; 'for Macintosh thinks the birds require a rest. So we must amuse ourselves at home, and take a drive—to Dingwall, perhaps, if you feel inclined, or some such thing.'

'Nothing nicer,' answered Norah. 'Fanny, I am going to improve my mind with a book till it is time to dress for dinner;

and, departing with *Guy Manner*, she enjoyed half an hour's comfortable reading before beginning to adorn herself for that meal.

She appeared at dinner-time in a pale-blue cashmere, with a lace handkerchief round her pretty shoulders, a dress that became her perfectly. 'Afraid she had been rather rude to Percival at tea-time, she exerted herself to be polite and pleasant to him now, stupid as she found his conversation. Percival brightened wonderfully under the process, coming out with one or two more than usually brilliant remarks, and attaching himself to her so closely in the drawing-room afterwards that Norah began to repent of her kind-heartedness.

Of course Mr. Leicester sang; he did a little of everything, and excelled in nothing. Moreover, his songs invariably were about 'The Stormy Billows of the Deep,' 'The Roar of the Winds,' or something equally stormy in character; and it used always to try Norah's gravity to the utmost to hear him warble these songs with his insignificant little tenor. To-night, after she had played for some time and left the piano, he was requested to sing by the kind-hearted Fanny, who knew he would be disappointed were he not asked, as he had a great idea of his own powers in that line. So he looked through his collection, being evidently particular in his selection to-night, and bringing two songs to Norah, asked if she would be so kind as to accompany him.

Hardly glancing at the songs, she answered, 'So sorry, Mr. Leicester, but you know I don't read music at first sight.'

'O, but really, Miss Grant,' remonstrated poor Percival, much hurt, 'I sang these songs ever so often last year to your accom-

paniment—these very same songs. I picked them out on purpose.’

Of course Norah could say no more; and, much to Geoffrey’s amusement, who was seated near and had heard the whole affair, she rose and went to the piano, where Percival warbled away and felt happy.

Later on in the evening Mr. Ross said, ‘I say, Geoff, you lazy fellow, you’ve not sung once since you came. Come, bring out your music and fire away. Perhaps Miss Grant will kindly accompany you.’

But, alas, if Norah ‘could not read at first sight’ one hour ago, she certainly could not pretend to have acquired the talent in so short a space of time; and so now, though she knew she could easily have complied with the request, she was obliged, on the same grounds as before, to refuse; and to her secret annoyance Fanny took her place, volunteering to try what she could do. Norah and Geoffrey had been very pleasant and friendly all day, and she was really sorry to refuse.

As Fanny saw her visitor to her room that night, and they were warming their feet over Norah’s fire, she said, ‘Well, dear, what do you think of our visitors this year, now that you have had a day’s experience?’

‘O, as to Mr. Leicester, you know my feelings of last year concerning him, and they have not altered one jot. Mr. Lindsay seems nice; but I don’t know him well enough to venture an opinion;’ with which cautious answer Mrs. Ross had to be content, as her friend then changed the subject.

CHAPTER III.

‘She spake such good thoughts natural.’
BROWNING.

MISS TENNANT arrived late the next afternoon. She was a girl of about five-and-twenty, small, and very dark. A nice girl on the whole, but very strongly imbued with the idea that everything English was right and everything Scotch—well, not wrong, but very far behind the rest of the world. Fanny had known her many years, but this was her first visit to Robin Lodge, and, indeed, to Scotland. Arriving late, she was too much fatigued with her journey to appear at dinner, so her first introduction to the guests in the house was at breakfast on Sunday morning. The weather seemed to be at ‘set fair’ just now; for it was another glorious day, as Norah observed with pleasure on rising that morning; a wet Sunday in the Highlands, many miles from a church, is rather a wearisome thing. Miss Tennant proved a very chatty young lady, much surprised at her first day in the Highlands being a fine one; in fact, she seemed to have prepared herself, from her remarks, to be surprised at everything she saw.

They generally had little home-made rolls for breakfast at Robin Lodge, very much the same as one might get in any country house in England; but Miss Tennant expressed herself much astonished at sight of them, greeting them rather as old friends in a land of strangers.

‘Now, really,’ said she; ‘now, Mr. Ross, do you really get these things in Scotland? I never imagined you could.’

‘Perhaps you thought our usual breakfast consisted of barley-broth and oat-cake, Miss Tennant?’ he answered, much amused. ‘No, I assure you we are quite civilised

up here, and make a rule of not having singed sheep's head for dinner more than four or five times a week.'

'No, really, Mr. Ross, do you, though! Well, I daresay it is very nice when you get accustomed to it. I am sure I am quite anxious to try it. Miss Grant, how do you get on up here with your English tastes? To-day, for instance, Sunday, I suppose you read the service at home, as I hear there is no English church near, or do you attend the service at the Scotch meeting-house?'

Norah saw her host's colour rise, for he was a Scotchman to the core, and she hastened to say,

'O, you know, Miss Tennant, both Mr. and Mrs. Ross belong to the Established Church of the country; there is no such thing as a meeting-house here, and I have always gone with them.'

'But do just as you like, dear,' added Mrs. Ross kindly. 'I am truly sorry we have no English church near, as I know you will miss it. I did very much when first I came here, but have got quite reconciled to the change now.'

'Quite a case of "love me, love my church," you see, Miss Tennant,' laughed her husband; 'but we don't victimise our visitors unless they choose, and you will find lots of improving literature in the library if you prefer to stay at home.'

'O dear, no, Mr. Ross, by no means; I shall immensely enjoy going, everything will be so new to me,' and Miss Tennant was evidently prepared to be very much astonished indeed.

The whole party started about eleven for their eight miles' drive to church in the wagonette that always conveyed the family thither on Sundays.

Arrived at the church-door,

Mr. Ross led the way in, then let Miss Tennant pass to the top of the pew; Norah followed.

The first thing that evidently astonished Miss Tennant was the entrance of the precentor, who proceeded to seat himself in his place under the pulpit. Being arrayed in a black gown, similar to the minister's, she naturally inferred he was the clergyman, and whispered to Norah,

'Does he always begin the service in that little box! How funny!'

'Why, that's the precentor,' whispered Norah, in return. 'Conducts the singing, you know; the clergyman has not come in yet.'

Presently he entered, carrying his hat in his hand; gave out the psalm to be sung; and the precentor, stooping down, produced a large placard, whereon was inscribed the name of the tune. This he displayed in a conspicuous position to the congregation, and after a minute removed. Then touching his tuning-fork, he hummed the note, and stood up. Miss Tennant stood up too! Norah touched her, finding it difficult to command her gravity; for the Lodge pew was exactly opposite the pulpit, and consequently to the precentor also, and the concerned look on that gentleman's face as he discovered his rival in the gallery was truly comical to behold. Miss Tennant saw her mistake in a moment, and resumed her seat, covered with confusion. The precentor had now started the tune in an incredibly high key, and the congregation at the third or fourth word joined in, all at their own sweet will and individual taste. He led them safely up to a truly astonishing pitch; then, with a placid smile, meanly left them to make the downward journey by themselves; and so on through

the psalm, varying the performance now and then with impromptu turns and shakes, wonderful to hear, but totally impossible to join in, they came at such unexpected moments. Then followed the prayer, and the clergyman was a truly good old man, and prayed as he felt. After that came the Old and New Testament reading, more singing of the same description as the first, more prayers, and the sermon. As soon as the text was given out, the precentor found the place in his large Bible, evidently wishing to call attention to the close way in which he meant to follow the discourse; but at the same time he carefully placed the Bible to one side of him. He then produced from his pocket a clean folded handkerchief, a box of snuff, and a paper parcel. The handkerchief he opened and laid on the desk before him; from the box of snuff he profusely helped himself with a small bone spoon; from the paper parcel he took a large peppermint-drop, which he conveyed to his mouth under cover of the palm of his hand. Then placing his head on the pocket-handkerchief, he remained in that position, immovable, during the rather lengthy sermon, to all appearance asleep, save for the cheerful crunching of peppermint he kept up all the time. Perhaps it was good for his voice; for he sang the final hymn with redoubled fervour, and, if possible, at a greater height than before. Then came the collection, when the whole congregation seemed to contribute the same sum of one penny. Miss Tennant had unfortunately forgotten her purse, and was going to let the box pass without contributing. She attempted this; but no, that patient little box at the end of the long stick remained station-

ary in front of her, seeming to say, 'No, my friend, you have had your discourse, and must pay your penny!' till Norah, taking pity on her, came to her rescue with a coin from her own purse; then, and not till then, did that imperturbable elder depart satisfied.

'Well, Miss Tennant,' remarked Mr. Ross, as they drove home, 'what do you think of our service? I rather suspect next Sunday you will prefer a book in the library.'

'O no, Mr. Ross, indeed I liked it; every one seemed so much in earnest, and the service so simple and honest. If only some of the old women did not eat quite so many peppermints! Still, I must acknowledge it was altogether more primitive than I had expected.'

'Yes,' said Mr. Lindsay; 'but you know you must not take this special service as a pattern of how it is performed everywhere, in towns for instance. The primitive service naturally belongs to the more primitive part of the country, and if you go into a Scotch church in Edinburgh or Glasgow you will see the difference. So many of the churches have now quite got over their prejudice to organs, &c.; and, with all due respect to our friend the precentor, we must in honesty acknowledge the singing might be improved, although, poor man, he evidently did his best.'

'You speak as if you were half a Scotchman yourself, Mr. Lindsay,' remarked Norah.

'And so I am, Miss Grant, just exactly half; for although my mother is English, my father was a thorough Scotchman. However, he gave in to all her English tastes, and I have grown up more English in my feelings than Scotch, and can uphold either country, or

both, when they stand in need of it.'

'Upon my word,' remarked Mr. Leicester, as they alighted at home after their long drive, 'I never heard anything more trying to a man with a fine ear—'

'And voice,' added Norah, *sotto voce*.

'Than that singing this morning; as for the sermon, you all say it was good; but I confess I heard very little of it beyond the text, which I have forgotten. Those windows opposite make one so confoundedly sleepy, I declare I found it impossible to keep awake.'

'So it seemed, Leicester,' said Mr. Ross, laughing, as they entered the house. 'I never saw any one sleeping more peacefully. I nudged you once, but to no purpose, and left off trying at last, thinking it better to let you have your noonday's sleep out undisturbed.'

Leicester only returned a good-natured laugh, and the party went up-stairs to prepare for the early Sunday dinner. The rest of the day passed very quickly; for in the afternoon the gentlemen went out for a walk, Miss Tennant retired to her room to write letters, Mrs. Ross and Norah settled themselves in front of the drawing-room fire and enjoyed a truly feminine confidential chat, till the children came down after their nursery tea to say their Sunday hymns to their mother. They usually heard some Sunday stories after this; but to-day, having a new element in Miss Grant, they preferred to hear them from her. Rather to Norah's relief, Mrs. Ross soon retired up-stairs, leaving the children under her friend's care, who liked infinitely better to tell her stories to the children alone, without any more critical listeners. Master Ted, whose ideas

frequently got muddled, demanded the story of 'Jovus and the Beanstalk' and 'The Ark that Moses built.' His doting mother had, time after time, endeavoured to set his infant mind right on these facts, but in vain; he stuck to his opinions like a man, and she only now felt thankful if he kept to these two points alone, and did not go on to add that it was Pharaoh who cut off John the Baptist's head, &c. Without tormenting him with arguments (for she knew Teddy of old), Norah related one after another of the sweet old Bible stories that children have loved to hear for years and years, and, let us hope, will continue to do so long as there are children on earth.

She told them in her own simple manner, as she had often done to her little sister at home, and Ted and Milly clamoured for 'just one more, Miss Grant, just this one;' and Norah continued to unfold her store, till Ted, discovering, to his extreme disgust, that Milly had fallen asleep on her knee, marched off to find his mother, leaving Norah to her own thoughts, in company with the sleeping child and the fire.

Unperceived by her some one had entered the room; for, returned from their walk, Mr. Ross and Leicester had retired up-stairs, and Geoffrey, seeing the drawing-room dark and to all appearance tenantless, had come in, intending to enjoy a *dolce far niente* in the firelight. He had only just entered, when he saw Norah, seated with her back to him, watching the fire, and Milly fast asleep in her arms. He stood still for a moment, gazing at the pretty home picture before him with admiration; ay, and with just a little more than common admiration, too. He had once or twice caught a very sweet soft look on Norah's

face (as in the boat that day), but never yet had he seen this particular expression; for as she sat with Milly's curly head nestling on her arm, looking down on the pretty little rosy child, there was something very wistful, tender, and sad on Norah's face. Geoffrey would have given much to be able to paint her just as she was then. Little children of Milly's age Norah almost worshipped; and the photograph that always stood on her toilet-table, the golden curl in the locket she so constantly wore, and a tiny grave at home all told the same story. Her only little brother, whom she had passionately loved, and to whom she had been a sort of little mother, had died some three or four years ago. Poor Norah had learnt the truth of the words, 'There is no flock, however watched and tended,

But one dead lamb is there;'

and the death of her little brother had been a blow it took long for her to get over, though to outsiders she was still the merry girl they had always known (for who could enjoy a joke like Norah, or whose laugh was so gay as hers?); still at quiet times like this Sunday evening, and when with little children, you could see that far-away wistful gaze which Geoffrey noticed now.

He stole gently and quietly away, feeling rather like a culprit for having lingered at all; not for worlds would he have had Norah imagine she had been watched. He was just in time; for the moment after she roused herself with a sigh, and taking the still sleeping Milly in her arms, carried her gently up-stairs and delivered her into Mrs. Jones's motherly care after imprinting a kiss on the sweet little face. She did not linger as usual for a chat, and nurse observed the sad look

on her face and felt sorry; for the usually bright Miss Grant was a great favourite of hers, as indeed she was with all the household from highest to lowest; she had such a friendly smile for all, such a grateful 'thank you' for the least service rendered, that it was a pleasure to serve her.

Geoffrey did not get that fire-side picture out of his head for some time, though when he and Norah met again she had the usual bright look on her face, and laughed with Mr. Ross and snubbed the officious Leicester just as she had done before; but he felt that he had had a peep behind the scenes, and knew Norah better in consequence, though what had caused that expression he knew not, and rather wondered. Certain it is that in the course of the evening, when Norah had been playing some sacred music, and Leicester, more than usually attentive, after turning over her leaves, addressed some commonplace remark to the generally good-natured Lindsay, the latter answered him so snappishly as to make Mr. and Mrs. Ross look up astonished. But a minute after, when his back was safely turned, Mrs. Ross looking up caught her husband's eye, nodded wisely, and smiled. He frowned and shook his head, but she did not seem much to mind; continued to wear a particularly satisfied expression all the evening, and kissed Norah 'good-night' even more warmly than usual. Foolish little Mrs. Ross! Match-making little Mrs. Ross!

CHAPTER IV.

'Remember this world, though it is not the best, is next to the best we shall ever attain.'—SWAINE.

Mrs. Ross had a call to make next day, and asked Norah and

Miss Tennant if they would accompany her; 'and you may come too,' she added to Percival, who had refused to go with the other gentlemen on a fishing expedition for fear of aggravating a slight cold he had (only perceptible, however, to himself); 'that is, if it won't increase your cold.'

'O, no fear of that, thanks, Mrs. Ross,' answered the recumbent youth. 'That's not the sort of thing to hurt it; I was only afraid of standing about with wet feet.'

Norah had looked anything but delighted as Percival accepted the invitation, and now said,

'Don't you think, Fanny, four are rather too many for an afternoon call, even for an invasion in the Highlands? Suppose I stay at home; I don't mind in the least.'

'Suppose nothing of the kind, my dear;' and Percival's countenance, which had begun to fall, resumed its usual placid expression. 'The Keiths are such nice people; they took Glen Inver this year, you know, and are indeed our only near neighbours. No, come by all means; the drive there is lovely, and if you all feel inclined I thought we might walk back, it is only four or five miles from here.'

'Delightful!' said Miss Tennant. 'You know, Mrs. Ross, I am a first-rate walker, and this Highland air is so delicious!'

Norah looked doubtfully at Percival.

'Mr. Leicester, you will never be up to a five-mile walk; a cold is such a weakening thing, you know. I should advise you to ask Mrs. Jones to meet you half-way with Milly's perambulator; she is wonderfully good-natured, and I don't think would refuse.'

Percival coloured, for once in his life looking put out. Mrs. Ross,

though she could not resist smiling, frowned at Norah, who went on counting the stitches in the sock she was knitting with absorbed attention. Miss Tennant wore an expression of astonishment, and Norah expected every moment to hear her ask, 'Do gentlemen really drive in perambulators in the Highlands? Now, do they really, Miss Grant?'

'I think I shall try and arrange a picnic with the Keiths, if they are at home,' remarked Mrs. Ross. 'Glen Inver is a huge house, it would hold half-a-dozen of our little Lodges; and as it is full of visitors, we might have some fun. They could come here and picnic, to the head of the loch; there are some splendid nut-bushes in the wood there, and the nuts should be about ripe now; or we might join them, and climb one of the hills together. Are you equal to climbing, Kate? you know our Highland hills are pretty stiff work.'

'Delightful!' said Miss Tennant; 'if there is one thing I enjoy, it is a good stiff climb.'

'Very well, then I can propose either arrangement. I hope the weather will be kind and keep fair.'

'How many Keiths are there?' asked Norah; 'were those some of their party in church yesterday?'

'Yes, to your right. There are five children—three sons and two daughters, all grown up. The youngest girl looks about nineteen; I am sure you would like her, Norah, she is such a frank jolly girl; goes in for all sorts of manly sports—fishes, rows beautifully, rides, and is very anxious to shoot, only her parents, very wisely, I think, forbid that. She climbs like a squirrel, and always looks most at home on the hill. I like what I have seen of her immensely, she is so hearty and

frank, and time will soften soon enough what is now too brusque in her manners. The other girl, Nina, is some years older (there is a brother between): she is just the reverse of her sister in every way—delicate, fair, rather pretty, and shy. But I must say Miss Jim Keith, as they call her, interests me most; her name is Jemima, but her brothers shortened it for her, and the nickname suits her to perfection.'

'Are the men presentable?' inquired Percival.

'Yes, nice gentlemanly fellows; some of them are perhaps coming over to shoot this week, so you can judge for yourself. Now, if you really all care to come, I think we should get ready, if we mean to reach home again in respectable time.'

They all went up-stairs, and as Norah entered her room, Mrs. Ross followed, and, closing the door behind her, said, trying meanwhile to look grave:

'My dear Norah, you really are snubbing poor Mr. Leicester too much; you evidently quite hurt his feelings just now, and there was no occasion for so much sarcasm. You know, my dear,' she added, 'you are very unworldly wise. Percival will be, and indeed is, very well off, and he is happy in a father and mother who will think the girl he chooses perfect.'

Norah's eyes flashed and her colour rose for a moment; but she soon began to smile, and, putting her hands on Fanny's shoulders, said, looking her full in the face:

'Don't play the hypocrite, Fanny dear; those mercenary views don't belong to you, and I don't like to hear them. I would rather marry a church-mouse whom I loved and esteemed, than some one worth his weight in gold whom I neither could love nor respect; and so would you, I know

well, only you thought I needed a lecture. No, Fanny, Mr. Leicester gets no more snubbing than he deserves if he will not take a hint, and though all this sounds, I am afraid, rather like

"Miss Biddy Baxter,
Who refused Captain Caxter
Afore he axed her,"

still you understand me, I know. How long does this very interesting gentleman remain here?

'To the end of next week, at least, I think. No, Norah, honestly I don't think you need treat the poor fellow so badly; I assure you it does no good.'

'Well, I agree with you there, at least,' assented Norah, laughing, 'and I will be particularly polite this afternoon, just to please you. But you must take the consequences; and mind, I can't promise to keep from an occasional snub, it's too tempting sometimes.'

True to her word, Norah was most markedly polite all through the drive, conversed intelligently with Percival on all subjects, from politics to ferns, and was altogether so charming that he brightened and glowed, becoming so attentive that Mrs. Ross began to repent of her lecture, and heartily wished she had left her eccentric young friend alone.

Glen Inver stood high on the face of a hill, and the party got out at the foot, intending to walk up to the house. Percival announced his intention of sitting down to await their return, being easily 'bored' by afternoon calls. Another day Norah would have offered to send him out all sorts of comforts from the house, or been equally satirical; but to-day, remembering her promise, she walked demurely up the avenue chatting to Miss Tennant and Fanny. But the former stopping behind to examine some ferns she

was 'astonished' to find, Fanny took the opportunity of saying, 'Norah, you are *too* tiresome! I wash my hands of you, and shall let you settle your own concerns for the future.'

'Thank you, dear,' answered that young lady, much relieved; 'perhaps that will be the best way after all. I am sure you see your plan would not do at all.'

'I never knew any one so ridiculous, Norah; why can't you strike a happy medium?'

'I am afraid that chord was left out of my composition,' laughed Miss Grant; and at that moment Miss Tennant coming up, the conversation dropped, rather to Fanny's relief, for she had plans for her friend in which Percival played no part, though she felt sorry at the same time for the amount of snubbing he received. In the end, however, her friend proved to be the more far-sighted of the two.

On arriving at Glen Inver, they found Mrs. Keith at home, seated alone in the drawing-room. Most of her party, she said, were amusing themselves on the lawn, it was too glorious a day to stay indoors; and after a few minutes she asked if they would like to go out too—tea was there, and they would find it more amusing than indoors. Fanny gladly consented, and their hostess led the way by the side of the house to a large lawn, where they found an assembly of cheerful young people, mostly gathered under the shade of an ash-tree, where Peter Keith, a youth of about twenty-one, was officiating at the tea-table, in spite of the remonstrances of his eldest sister, who was languidly reposing in a garden-chair, and not making any very strenuous efforts to prevent him. As the callers arrived on the scene they were greeted by a peal of laughter, caused by the

tormenting Peter having succeeded in lodging the contents of the milk-jug in the tea-pot, and then declaring he was on the verge of a remarkable discovery, 'for only add a little sugar and the concoction is perfect. This is certain to be the way in which our grandchildren will drink their afternoon tea; there may even be a little bread-and-butter added, all coming from the same tea-pot, and the invention is complete.'

Mrs. Keith and her guests were standing by the table, laughing in spite of themselves, before Peter had finished his harangue. His mother introduced the girls to her daughters, and took Mrs. Ross off to a comfortable garden-seat, telling Peter to order a fresh relay of tea; 'and, Jim,' she called to her youngest daughter, 'remember *you* are to pour it out. I won't have any more of Peter's pranks. What on earth have you been doing to your hair, Jim? you are not fit to be seen.'

'Only playing tennis, mother dear. Isn't it a glorious game?' said Miss Jim, turning to Norah; 'I don't think there ever was anything like it, do you?'

'I have played so little, I hardly enjoy a game thoroughly yet,' answered Norah, 'but it looks splendid when well played.'

'That it is! I hope you are paying Mrs. Ross a long visit, Miss Grant, so that you can come over often and play; do you know, I like your face so much.'

Norah laughed, 'Allow me to return the compliment, Miss Keith.'

'I'm not Miss Keith, so don't call me that, please; and "Miss Jim" is too ridiculous—it always sounds as if one should say "Master Jim;" so I am simply "Jim," neither more nor less. Come along now, and find a seat under this tree; I see Nina is talking to Miss Tennant; just wait

one moment, and I'll catch my two brothers and introduce them to you. That's Peter coming across the lawn, carrying the tea-pot; he's a dear boy and my favourite brother. Ah, and here comes Bob. Miss Grant, allow me to introduce Mr. Robert Keith to you, also Mr. Peter Keith: he doesn't mean to be rude, but he forgets that he still has the tea-pot in his hands, and is wearing as a cravat the ribbon that *should* tie up "my bonnie brown hair." Pray excuse his country manners!

Peter laughed and apologised, and he and Norah were soon chatting together in a very friendly way, while Jim went off to bring Norah her tea.

'Now you have seen all our people but Harry,' she said, as she returned with her visitor's cup and her own, 'and he is out shooting with some of our party.'

Norah rather wondered how many 'our party' consisted of, for the lawn seemed pretty well covered with boys and girls of all ages. On looking about her, however, she discovered the party consisted of the members of the Keith family already mentioned, two Miss Grahams—pretty girls of four- or five-and-twenty—a comical boy named Jack Rowe, who acted as Peter's partner in all the latter's mischievous pranks, and a Mr. Ward, a cousin of the family, who seemed to be enjoying a promising flirtation with the younger and prettier Miss Graham. Considering that part of the household was out shooting, Norah thought Glen Inver must be a pretty elastic house.

They remained some time, till Mrs. Ross, feeling for the lonely Percival, rose to go. As they said 'Good-bye,' Mrs. Keith turned to the two girls, saying, 'Mrs. Ross has kindly proposed we should join you in a picnic up

your lake, and I know nothing will give my young people more pleasure; she is to fix a day next week for it; but in the mean time she has promised me you will all join us on Friday, when we intend making a picnic up Ben Wyvis. You must all come as early as possible; we shall drive to the foot, and any who like may ride up on Daisy and Nolly, our two little Shetland ponies. The cart goes up too, so I think I may promise not to over-fatigue you.'

Norah thanked her warmly; Mrs. Keith was such a kind motherly sort of woman, and seemed to enjoy planning frolics for her young people quite as much as they did themselves. Miss Tennant said it would be 'delightful;' in fact, I verily believe if you had offered to cut off her head, she would only have answered 'Delightful!' from sheer habit.

Jim, Peter, and Bob walked to the foot of the avenue with their guests, and they parted with much friendly feeling on both sides. The whole party at Glen Inver seemed so thoroughly to enjoy life, did everything with such zeal (Nina, perhaps, excepted, and she, poor girl, was really delicate), they were so hospitable and friendly, so thoroughly well-bred, in fact, that no one could help feeling at home with them all, and Norah, for one, had much enjoyed her call. Perhaps that was the reason she answered Percival even more scornfully than usual, when he asked if they had not been awfully bored, they had been such a confoundedly long time.

'Certainly not; and please not to swear, Mr. Leicester; it is not polite in ladies' society, you know.'

'How did you like them all?' asked Mrs. Ross, as they trudged along home.

'Very much indeed,' answered

Norah. 'Miss Jim is one of the most amusing girls I have seen for a long time, and her pet brother, Peter, is truly comical. Short as our acquaintance is, he confided to me at least half a dozen scrapes he has been in since his arrival here this year, the least important being a fall from their boat into the river. The Sunday before last, he says, he was obliged to leave church, or he would have had convulsions from trying not to laugh at the precentor.'

'Poor boy,' said Fanny, laughing, 'I saw him leave the church, looking very red in the face, and feared he was ill. I don't wonder at our friend the precentor rather upsetting any one's gravity till he gets accustomed to him. I remember well, the first time I went to church there, how hard I tried to keep very serious, and failed utterly, so I can feel for Master Peter. How did you get on with the eldest daughter, Kate? Is she nice?'

'Delightful,' said Miss Tennant, 'so sweet and fragile-looking. It was such a pity you did not come in, Mr. Leicester; I am sure you would have enjoyed it.'

'To tell you the truth, Miss Tennant, I find it a very difficult thing to make a satisfactory call among a lot of ladies. You try to talk to all, but some of course must be left out, and then they feel hurt;' and Percival puffed away at his cigar complacently (for he had had leave to smoke).

Mrs. Ross, with all her good-nature, could not help laughing at this arrant conceit, and Norah remarked demurely,

'I think, in that case, Mr. Leicester, the best plan would be to explain the matter to them, tell them you will endeavour to take them all in turn, but not to break their hearts if you cannot address many words to each; or they might draw lots.'

'Really, Miss Grant, your first idea is a very good one: I declare I'll try it; you have such splendid ideas sometimes.'

'Yes, only sometimes,' she answered, laughing. 'Fanny, what a pretty girl that younger Miss Graham is!'

'Yes, and some one else is of the same opinion, I fancy. Mrs. Keith must have her hands pretty well filled just now; it can be no joke chaperoning such a number.'

'When do you expect the gentlemen home, Mrs. Ross?' inquired Miss Tennant. 'I half thought we might walk a little way along the hill and meet them; it is hardly any farther, and they should be returning soon. Shall we go?'

They gladly assented, for the evening was so glorious that they all felt loth to go in. The setting sun was just sinking behind the hills, like a beautiful orb of fire, throwing lights and shadows on the mountain-side, covered now with ferns, changed from green to dusky gold; and one would be indifferent indeed to look on such a scene unmoved. Its beauty seemed even to affect Percival; for though Norah would rather not have spoken at all just then, his remarks, albeit they were somewhat weak, were limited to expressions of pleasure at the lovely picture, and Norah answered him gently and kindly.

They sat down on the heather to await the fishermen; and soon, over the brow of the hill, they appeared, walking at a brisk pace and carrying their rods and baskets.

'You energetic people!' said Mr. Ross, as they came up. 'I thought you meant to call at Glen Inver this afternoon, Fanny!'

'And so we have, only the evening was too glorious to waste

indoors, and we came along to meet you instead.'

Mr. Ross threw himself down on the heather by his wife's side, and Geoffrey, tossing off his cap the better to enjoy the breeze, followed his example, reposing lazily on the heather, his brown eyes dreamily contemplating the sky. How handsome he looked, to be sure!

'Glorious, indeed, heavenly,' he remarked presently. 'If one could but paint such scenery properly! But it is almost impossible, and seems mere presumption to attempt it.'

'I don't quite see that,' said Fanny. 'No doubt it is impossible to produce just this effect; but you pay your tribute of admiration by merely attempting to copy it, and your picture would perhaps give pleasure to those who might never see a scene like this.'

Geoffrey was silent, playing with a bunch of rowan-berries he held in his hand. Miss Tenant espied them, and for once, correct in her conjectures, exclaimed,

'O Mr. Lindsay, are not those rowan-berries? How lovely they are, to be sure! Miss Grant, would they not look charming on one's dress?'

'Very pretty,' said Norah quietly.

Geoffrey had handed Miss Tenant the bunch on her expressing so much admiration; but when she had exhausted all the adjectives in her vocabulary he quietly held out his hand for them to be returned, rather, it seemed, to that young lady's disappointment. But she soon discovered some heather she thought she would like, and as the others rose to go, requested Percival to cut her some, as it was too tough for her to gather.

Mrs. and Mr. Ross strolled on in front, consequently it fell out

that Norah and Geoffrey walked home in company.

'Such an evening as this,' remarked Geoffrey, after a moment's silence, 'seems to live in one's memory for years. I don't know if it is so with you, Miss Grant, but often when I've been fagged and tired with work at home, it is rest merely to close one's eyes and recall such a scene as this, simply to remember there *are* such spots as these under heaven; for we artists have rain and misty scenes to paint sometimes, as well as sunny pictures, you know,' he added, smiling a little sadly.

'Yes,' said Norah, 'I know; and surely such a feeling is something like the higher aim, which ought to run through all our lives, only unfortunately it doesn't always,' she added somewhat sadly. 'I know that I at least am always forgetting that some days must be "dark and cloudy," and get shamefully cross and irritable when things seem to take a turn of going wrong. It's all very well to be amiable and pleasant up here, where everything is done to make one happy; but it's home-life that tries the temper most, and I am ashamed to say I know I fail there sadly sometimes.'

'Not more than the rest of us, I fancy,' said Geoffrey kindly, remembering Fanny's information; 'only perhaps we are not all so frank in confessing it. I speak from experience at least; for I know I find it a very difficult thing to say "I was wrong," and still more so to say "I am wrong."'

They had arrived at the avenue-gate by this time, and as they walked up it Geoffrey said,

'Miss Grant, will you accept and wear these berries? I gathered them thinking they would look pretty with that white dress you wore the first evening. If

you would rather not, just throw them away.'

Norah coloured slightly, and looked up pleased as she took the berries, and answered,

'Certainly, I shall wear them with pleasure, Mr. Lindsay, and thank you very much. I was wishing for some only the other day, and these are such beauties;' and she entered the house and tripped up-stairs with her berries.

As Geoffrey dressed for dinner that evening, he held a short conversation with himself, something in this wise:

'Geoffrey Lindsay, be so good as to analyse your true feelings, my friend! Can you honestly tell me that after having gone through the world some five-and-thirty years, seen pretty girls of all styles and classes, been courted by many, kindly welcomed by all, and yet remained fancy free,—do you mean to tell me you feel signs of this blissful state of affairs coming to an end, simply because, for the last four or five days, you have been in the company of a little English girl, neither so much more handsome nor so very much more captivating than shoals of girls you have already met and passed by? And Geoffrey was obliged in honesty to answer, 'Yes, I do. The symptoms seem very bad; and what is more, I am not in the least ashamed of them!'

CHAPTER V.

"What stature is she of?" "Just as high as my heart." SHAKESPEARE.

CONTRARY to all expectations, and in spite of last night's sunset, the next day dawned dark and cloudy; the hills were covered with thick white mist, and as Norah on rising looked out on the melan-

choly change, she felt her spirits fall, and began her toilette in rather a depressed and, if it must be confessed, a cross frame of mind. But being of a cheerful disposition, before half the operation of dressing was over she wore her usual bright expression, and was already planning how much might be done even on a wet day in the Highlands. She would finish knitting those socks, and send them off with a long letter to a young boy-cousin in Australia; poor fellow! she had not written to him for ages, and letters were such a treat to him. She would begin to embroider that pinafore for Milly; take a long practice at some sadly neglected music; write home to her mother; perhaps get asked up to tea in the nursery. Dear me! the day was not half long enough for all this energetic young lady meant to do. And thus it came to pass that Norah descended to the dining-room with an exceedingly cheerful countenance, 'quite like a ray of sunshine,' thought some one who had arrived there before her.

'I wonder if Duncan would admit this to be a wet day,' remarked Geoffrey at breakfast, looking out on the dripping scene.

'Not he,' laughed Norah; 'it's only a "a little saft," perhaps, or inclined to be "shoory."'

'Pray what does "saft" mean?' inquired Miss Tennant, who had not much imagination, but was laudably anxious to learn all she could.

'A day when it's advisable, according to our ideas, to put on a thick pair of boots on venturing out of doors, or you might, like the young lady of Chertsey, "sink underground;" not to mention a waterproof and large umbrella,' answered Mr. Ross. 'I hope you have provided yourself with those necessaries, Miss Tennant.'

'If you have,' said Norah, 'you have been much wiser than I was last year; for I came up with only moderately thick shoes, not a serge dress in my collection, but principally prints, which of course got finished up in no time, till Fanny took compassion on me, and lent me a gown. I have been wiser this year, having taken lessons from experience; and my hill-boots are really a sight to behold.'

'Sensible girl,' said Mr. Ross approvingly; 'those who mean to enjoy themselves in the Highlands should put appearances in their pocket; it's the only way.'

'Unless they can just manage to combine the two, Ross,' suggested Geoffrey; 'a thing within the bounds of possibility.'

'Thank you, Mr. Lindsay,' said Fanny, laughing: 'my husband says rude things sometimes without meaning it; unlike most Highlanders, he tells us what he thinks rather too frankly.'

'Of course I meant present company always excepted; that was understood. Teddy, my son, if you don't keep your fingers out of that sugar-bowl, you'll have to sit by me instead of next your short-sighted mother. Fanny, what do you stuff that child's pockets with? they stick out in rather a peculiar manner.'

Fanny, whose attention had been given to her guests, had not been very observant of the occupations of her hopeful young son and heir, whose pockets she now emptied of at least a dozen lumps of sugar; and Ted was reprimanded, and ordered up-stairs till he could learn the manners of a gentleman. Geoffrey interceded for the little scapegrace, however, who was a great favourite of his, and Teddy was forgiven. He came round to Geoffrey's side, looked up at him with a grateful expression in his mischievous

eyes, patted him condescendingly on the shoulder, and said,

'Thank you, Mr. Geoff; I'll do the same for you next time. I'm very fond of you; ain't you, Miss Grant?'

Poor Norah coloured—it was such a very awkward remark—and Geoffrey looked almost equally confused. Mr. Ross suddenly became intensely interested in the anatomy of the cold game he was carving, while his wife said sharply, though with an amused twinkle in her eye,

'Ted, if you talk so much you had better run up to the nursery; it's the right place for little boys who forget that they should be seen and not heard.'

Teddy retired discomfited, for this time his friend Geoffrey did not intercede for him, but, on the contrary, looked rather relieved at his departure.

Such a day as it was, to be sure! How should it be spent? Mr. Ross, being a Highlander and accustomed to the deluge, proposed a walk in waterproof and goloshes; Percival, a long smoke, and the ladies to come to the smoking-room and chat; which plan, though a very good one for a little while before retiring at night, hardly suited the general feelings at ten in the morning, so Percival collapsed. Geoffrey offered to paint the portraits of the whole family, and Fanny rather caught at the idea; not that she would sit—O dear, no! she never would have the patience; but Mr. Lindsay might take the children, or Miss Tennant, or Norah—yes, why not Norah?

Geoffrey looked up quickly.

'Miss Grant, will you sit? I might make a family group. You must sit, Mrs. Ross, if it is only to hold Milly,' added the crafty Geoffrey, who had an idea in his head, and knew perfectly well Mrs.

Ross would never consent to his proposal.

'O no,' she answered, 'I can't spare the time. Milly will look a great deal prettier on Norah's knee, and be quite as good. Tell me when you would like her, and nurse shall dress her in the most artistic of her frocks.'

So the matter rested, and it came to pass that after breakfast Norah found herself with the children in the drawing-room, placed as Geoffrey wished to paint them; he thought he should do Miss Tennant more justice if she sat alone some other day. Strangely enough, Norah was placed in exactly the same position Geoffrey had seen her in on that Sunday evening seated by the fire. Only at this early hour Milly was decidedly wakeful, and preferred sitting up. Never mind, the picture would be just as nice so; and Geoffrey dabbled away, looking very contented, and so radiant that Teddy called out,

'Hullo, Mr. Geoff, what's making you smile so? Do look, Miss Grant; he's grinning all over! Is it your birthday, Mr. Geoff?'

'Was I smiling, Teddy? No, it's not my birthday yet, fortunately, my boy; they come round rather too soon for my taste, as it is. It must have been at the fine weather.'

'O, what a fib! Where do you expect to go to, Mr. Geoff? I say, Miss Grant, he says it's a fine day.'

'Did I say it was fine weather?' asked the absent-minded Geoffrey. 'That was a mistake, then; it must have been at sight of the nice little man I am painting.'

Poor fellow! He was fibbing again. Teddy's small figure had been sketched in long ago, and all Geoffrey's attention at the time was given to painting a pair of

soft gray eyes, trying to put into them an expression he had seen there before, but not the one Norah wore now. Teddy was much mollified by the last answer; it flattered his vanity, and he remained quiet by Norah's side for a while, playing with the trinkets on her watch-chain. Soon, however, he stole round to see how his picture progressed, evidently expecting to find himself in a prominent position, with Norah and Milly dimly appearing somewhere in the background, for he exclaimed,

'I say, Mr. Geoff, I don't think you paint fair at all, you know. I am only done in little dim marks, and Milly's not there at all; and there's Miss Grant, you go on painting and painting at her just as if you 'joyed it,' said this *enfant terrible*, hitting pretty near the truth; 'and you've gone and put her on the dress she wore on Sunday, not a bit what she has on now. I don't call you half a good artist. I believe I'll go to nurse;' and he marched off in high dudgeon.

'Why have you altered my dress, Mr. Lindsay?' asked Norah. 'Isn't this nice enough?'

'O yes,' answered Geoffrey, whose conscience, poor fellow, if he had any, must have been pricking to distraction by this time at the number of fibs he had indulged in. 'Only I thought that soft material made more graceful folds, and also contrasted better in colour with Milly's white frock. But I can alter it if you like.'

'O no,' said Norah. 'The picture is for Fanny, not me; so you can use all your imagination to make it a pretty one.'

'Not much need of that,' thought Geoffrey; if all his subjects were as pleasing, he would soon make his fortune; at the same time determining that this

picture should not be delivered over to Mrs. Ross till a duplicate had been made of at least a portion of it.

'Miss Grant,' he observed, 'when are you going to try your hand at a sketch? The time is flying, and you have never even begun one, have you?'

Norah laughed.

'If you had seen my last year's production, Mr. Lindsay, I should think you were satirical. I can't draw properly; and as there is so much to enjoy up here, I don't see the use of wasting my time in attempting what I can't do.'

'I wish you would let me teach you,' said Geoffrey eagerly, looking up with an expression in his face which would have delighted Mrs. Ross, could she have seen it. 'I think I could help you, and should so enjoy it. May I, Miss Grant?'

Norah had also made one or two little discoveries during the last few days, and was therefore particularly anxious that her manner to Geoffrey should be frank and natural; the happy result of her resolves being that her voice sounded as if it had been indulging in a shower-bath of little icicles, as she made answer,

'Yes, some day, I daresay, thanks;' and then was provoked at her own constrained manner. 'So foolish,' thought she; and her feelings appearing in her face, Geoffrey mistook the cause, retired quickly into his shell, and said,

'Thank you, Miss Grant; I won't detain you any longer. I am afraid I have bothered you; but now I can easily work the picture up alone, and shall only ask for another sitting in a day or two. Allow me;' and he held the door open for her to pass.

Poor little Norah! When she reached her own room she stood

disconsolately looking out of the window for some time. She certainly could not have been admiring the view, for there was little or nothing but rain to be seen, pouring as if out of a tub; and it is a fact that an hour ago there was no appearance of a cold about her, but yet that poor little nose of hers wanted a deal of attention! The cold seemed even to have affected her eyes, for the handkerchief did good service in that region too. Poor little girl! poor little merry Norah! What could have been the matter with her? I think the cold must have made her head ache a little, for after she had bathed her face (colds always make such a figure of one) she sat down at her writing-table and rested her head on her hand before beginning her correspondence, letting the pen lie idly beside her, forgetting that it must be guided before it could form any characters. She roused herself with a sigh soon, and set to work in earnest, trying to make the home-letter as bright and cheerful as usual. But she was not very successful; for, as Mrs. Grant read it, she said to herself, 'I don't fancy that child is enjoying her visit as much as last year. Perhaps she is homesick, poor little soul! I'll write soon and propose her returning home.'

Norah finished her letter, looked in the glass to make sure no traces of her cold remained, and descended the stairs. The post-bag had just arrived, and Mr. Ross was in the act of opening it and dividing its contents, when she made her appearance.

'One for you, Miss Grant; this is really a case of patience rewarded, for something has turned up at last. Miss Tennant, three for you; catch, Fan, one, two. None for you, Percival; you don't write

enough to deserve any. Geoff, here's your share, one letter and a paper. One, two, three, four for me; what a shoal! Hullo! here's one from aunt Betsey, I declare! Fanny, I warn you, she is writing to offer a visit.'

Presently he began to laugh. 'Just as I thought: can we conveniently take her in for a couple of weeks, as she feels the change would do her good; and Bijou has been ailing lately, so he requires fresh air also; we are to telegraph reply at once.'

'If *only* she would leave that dog at home, I should welcome her twice as warmly,' said Fanny. 'I tremble for the children when it's in the house, it is such a cross-grained old thing. Ned, I wonder why your aunt never will write to me, proposing a visit? I suppose she considers me still too childish to be responsible for anything!'

This aunt of Mr. Ross was a maiden lady of some sixty years. She was a thorough 'old maid,' and there is a world of difference between that term and an 'unmarried lady.' For the former, as I take it, is generally peppery in temper, fidgety, prim, interferes when she has no occasion to, and is for ever standing on her dignity. But the nice old unmarried lady is so different. Not perhaps having any close household ties of her own, she is made heartily welcome wherever she goes. All the children love her, for does she not remember their likings to a nicety? and what delicious goodies come to them from that capacious pocket of hers! The mothers ever find in her a sympathetic listener to their many household joys or troubles. The grown-up sons and daughters find her such a delicious confidante; in all their pleasures and amusements she enters into the

fun with such zeal, just as if she had gone through exactly the same things herself. Whatever trials she may have had—and she probably has experienced not a few—they have certainly not affected her sweet temper, nor soured her life. O no! perhaps they have partly been the means of making her the dear old creature she is.

Now this aunt of Mr. Ross, this Miss Elizabeth Duff, was a confirmed 'old maid,' 'spinster,' or use what term you will. She had greatly disliked her nephew's marriage with Fanny Clifton, 'such a baby of a girl,' as she expressed it; and though on her many visits to them (for she was constantly writing to offer her company) Fanny had ever proved a capital young housewife, and a dutiful and gentle niece, the old lady had never got over her first aversion, and still obstinately persisted in the belief that it was her nephew who in reality managed all household matters, in a manner intensely amusing to onlookers, but which must have been as intensely exasperating to poor Fanny. One of her many peculiarities was the conviction that she suffered from total loss of appetite, which only the most delicate dishes could tempt; whereas in reality she consumed considerably more than her nephew, who had a very healthy appetite. Moreover, she was always accompanied on her visits by a remarkably fat, ugly, and snappish old poodle, most inaptly named Bijou, for anything but a jewel he proved, being as cross-grained a specimen as you could discover anywhere. Such being the respective characters of the expected guests, it is hardly to be wondered at that their offered visit was not looked forward to with much pleasure. But Fanny was a hospitable little woman, and set about planning for

the comfort of her coming visitors. She gave orders for her aunt's room at once, as she would arrive early next morning, and in the afternoon herself went up-stairs to add the final touches, asking Norah to come and help her. She gladly consented, feeling thankful for the occupation.

The rain still came down most persistently, and she felt that at present Fanny's company up-stairs was preferable to remaining with the rest of the party below. She felt cross with herself for her behaviour of this morning. Why couldn't she have been simple and natural? She wondered what Mr. Lindsay thought of her, after he had been so kind too—offering to teach her to sketch. She would take the first opportunity of thanking him and accepting his offer, to show him how vexed she was with her stupidity.

So thought Norah, as she busied herself about, moving a chair here and a footstool there, under Fanny's careful supervision, till the room looked spick and span enough for a new pin's habitation.

'My dear,' said Fanny, as they reclined after their labours, 'if there is one speck of dust about, Miss Duff will notice it, and either remark on it to me, or, far worse, to the servants. She stayed with us some weeks about a year ago, and so exasperated a capital housemaid I had then that she gave up her place, not being able to work under more than one mistress. However, I really think everything looks right now, don't you? You might move that chair just a quarter of an inch to the left; thanks. And now let's come and have some tea after our exertions; it will be nice and refreshing.'

'I promised the children to have mine in the nursery,' answered Norah, who felt more in-

clined for her visit there just now than to be obliged to talk over the social teapot down-stairs. 'I shouldn't like to disappoint them, you know.'

'All right, dear, as you like; but I must go, or that awkward husband of mine will be making a mess of the cloth again;' and Fanny disappeared down-stairs.

Norah betook herself to the nursery, and tapped at the door, wondering to herself the while what on earth Teddy could be making such a row about, shouting loud enough to bring the house down. Her tap not being heard in the din, she opened the door and walked in. Surely the Fates must be against her to-day! Racing round the room, with Teddy screaming by his side and Milly perched on his shoulder, was Geoffrey, seeming to enjoy the fun just as much as the children; and Norah understood easily enough now what made him such a favourite in the nursery. As she entered, the three came to a pause, flushed and laughing. Near such frolicsome children who could be stiff? And as Geoffrey pulled forward nurse's low chair for her, and then threw himself breathless into another, Norah found herself blessing the little romps, who had put an end to the stiffness she so heartily wished had never arisen.

Fanny had not been blind to her friend's rather worried looks that day, and had purposely asked her assistance up-stairs. She also knew perfectly well that Geoffrey had accepted an invitation to the nursery tea that evening, and, trusting implicitly to her two dear frolicsome noisy children to put things right between them, had tripped away quite content on Norah's refusing her offer of tea down-stairs.

'Why, Teddy, you told me I

was to be the only guest,' observed Norah, capturing that young man.

'So you was, only ma asked Mr. Geoff afterwards,' he answered, with his usual straightforwardness, thereby disclosing state secrets. 'And I just call it jolly altogether. There's just four of us, you see—me and Milly, and you and Mr. Geoff; and Mrs. Jones has behaved awful mean, for she 'fused to give us four pots of jam, and here's only one pot!' and Teddy eyed it with great disgust.

'If that one pot is all demolished this evening, Ted, I think I know who will have to be sent for to-morrow. Now I see Mrs. Jones has made everything ready, so come along, and—I'll help you into your seats. There!' as Ted wriggled into his high chair; 'now keep still and say grace,' she continued, hoping to quiet his tremendous flow of spirits. Ted folded his hands, squeezed his eyes till nothing but a slit was to be seen, and began solemnly, 'Down in a green and shady bed.' Norah just managed to control her features and keep a grave face, saying, 'Ted, I am shocked; say grace properly, or I won't stay.'

Ted was a boy of sharp discernment, and not failing to observe Norah's mouth quivering, he began, even more hypocritically than before, 'Twinkle, twinkle, little star.' This time Norah looked very serious, and Milly being told to say grace like a good child, proceeded to lisp it out very prettily. Geoffrey, not wishing to spoil the discipline, had retired to the window, and enjoyed a good laugh with his back turned. And Teddy, now declaring that 'really, truly, Miss Grant, grace had gone out of his head now Mrs. Jones was away,' Norah had to believe and forgive the young

scapegrace. She proceeded to pour out the tea, and as Geoffrey came forward for his cup a bright idea seemed suddenly to strike the small boy, for he exclaimed, 'I call this just a beautiful tea; isn't it just like playing at houses, Milly? Mr. Geoff's married, you see, and Miss Grant's his wife, and they've asked us to visit them; isn't it a beautiful plan, Mr. Geoff?'

Both these little torments! they help you out of one difficulty just to make another. Geoffrey could have boxed Ted's ears with pleasure just then, as he noticed Norah's colour rise, and he expected to have a second edition of this morning's business brought about by this little plague. Luckily at that moment there came a knock at the door, and in marched Mr. Leicester, who pulled forward nurse's low chair, and, making himself quite comfortable, remarked, 'I wondered where you had flown to, Miss Grant, and on being told by Mrs. Ross, thought I should like tea in the nursery too;' and he pulled Ted's ear, not appearing to notice his growl of 'O, I say, now, who invited you to my party, I should like to know?'

Percival's manner with children was exactly the reverse of Geoffrey's; he made himself agreeable to them simply in their mother's presence, or before those whom he thought to please by so doing, when he would carefully place himself in the middle of a nice little audience (provided only they took the trouble of listening), and would then begin some story addressed, it is true, to the children, but certainly not intended for them, probably one which they could not even understand. Little they cared about it in consequence, and Percival now found it difficult to procure an audience at all for his fine stories. Geoffrey, on the

contrary, went on an exactly opposite principle, one far more attractive to children, whom he unaffectedly loved. Shy with them in the presence of others, you came upon him in out-of-the-way corners, playing with them, for them, giving himself up to them, and, of course, thoroughly adored by them, and no wonder: children are so quick to discover those who really care for them, and soon manage to make their discoveries public, in a manner, perhaps, not over-pleasant to their non-lovers. It is anything but safe to practise this sort of deception upon them, as Percival had before now discovered. Of course every one cannot be naturally fond of them; some people, and nice enough people too, seem really to dread them with much the same aversion they have to cats. It is not their fault; I believe they are born with the dislike; but if they are wise, they will pretend nothing but the truth about the matter, it is much the safest plan in the long-run. All the same, I maintain that those people are the nicest, and those men the most manly, who are honestly and unaffectedly fond of children.

Norah handed Mr. Leicester his tea, for once abstaining from a snub, as, to tell the truth, she felt his appearance at this critical moment really opportune; for the children seemed determined to land them on dangerous tracts, and nurse having modestly retired while they took tea, the entrance of Percival had for once been hailed with pleasure by both Norah and Geoffrey.

'How awfully fond you must be of children, Miss Grant!' quoth the young gentleman, sipping his tea and contemplating his pretty feet with satisfaction. 'Of course they are nice little things, and amusing at times; but do you

really prefer their society to that of reasonable beings?'

'It depends so much on what the children and the reasonable beings are like, you see,' responded Norah; meanly ready with any amount of rebuffs now he had helped her out of her difficulty. 'To-day, for instance, I preferred the children. You see everything goes by comparison, Mr. Leicester; and I know children who could beat some reasonable people hollow. Don't I, Ted?'

'Course,' replied Ted, not understanding a word of the conversation, but wondering when his unwelcome guest would 'take himself off.'

He had to wait some time, poor boy, for Percival found his seat by the fire so comfortable, and the view so pleasant, that he imbibed cup after cup of tea; till Norah refused to pour out more, telling him it would make him nervous, and broke up the meeting by ringing for Mrs. Jones, much to his dissatisfaction.

Norah felt thankful to that tea on the whole; as Fanny had intended, it had placed her and Geoffrey on their former friendly footing. He also had felt bothered all day for his huffiness of the morning, and was only too happy to have matters so easily mended. He was more than usually friendly with Norah that evening; and as the ladies retired to bed, carried up her candle and workbox, and shook her hand warmly as he said 'Good-night.' Fanny had popped into the nursery for her nightly look at her darlings, so the coast was clear; and Norah, thinking now or never was her chance, held out her hand once more, saying sweetly, and blushing as she spoke,

'Mr. Lindsay, I was very rude this morning, I am afraid, and hardly thanked you for offering to teach me to sketch; forgive

my rudeness, please, and I shall be so glad if you will.'

Geoffrey took the little hand offered to him so kindly, and held it in his own big paws for a moment, saying eagerly,

'I assure you, Miss Grant, there was no question of rudeness on your part, and therefore there is nothing to forgive. Mine was the rudeness in pressing my assistance on you as I did; but if you really mean this, and are not only saying it out of kindness, nothing could give me greater pleasure than helping you all I can;' and he shook her hand warmly as he once more wished her 'Good-night.'

'What a dear little thing she is!' he thought, as Norah disappeared into her room, and he remembered how sweet she had looked, standing there in her pretty evening dress, glancing up half timidly with those beautiful

soft eyes, and blushing rosy-red as she spoke. 'I'd be well content to spend the rest of my life giving her sketching lessons, and die happily in the act. Bother the rest of the world! who are ready no doubt to do the same. It is such a pity that girls like that—one in a thousand—so often throw themselves away on some duffer of a man perfectly unable to value the treasure he gets; and I suppose I have about as much chance of winning her as Carlo has, always supposing I am not just such a duffer myself, except in the matter of valuing a priceless treasure when I see it;' and Geoffrey frowned as he marched down-stairs, and joined the other gentlemen over their cigars, leaving the conversation, however, almost entirely to them, and puffing away silently like a contemplative chimney out of temper.

(*To be continued.*)

LOVE IN A LIFT.

Love pervades everything. It is omnipresent. Places and conditions absolutely fatal to every other human experience do not affect *la grande passion*. There is printed record of love in a balloon; and the scientific gentleman at the Polytechnic Institution will bear credible witness that love has not been found impossible even in a diving-bell. Much sweet courtship has been conducted in railway carriages; and the present writer, who has never tasted the honeyed sweets of 'spooning' himself, once knew, however, an amiable gentleman who positively proposed, and was accepted, amid the awful gloom and roar of the Mont Cenis tunnel, and survived the strange sensation, and was married and happy ever afterwards, as the old story-books say. There is a farce, too, called *Love in a Fix*; but love in an hotel-elevator! Why, the same hotel actually advertised that identical lift in *Bradshaw's Railway Guide* as having been constructed upon an altogether improved principle, and furnished with a patent safety-break which rendered accidents quite impossible. But love has laughed at locksmiths and patent safety-breaks from the time of dangerous Helen and heroic Paris of Troy to that of Miss Blanche Whitney and Mr. Frank Fairlie, staying at the Cavendish Grand Hotel at Spaville the other day.

The Cavendish seemed altogether too immense and splendid for love, which demands, as you know, my dear madam, cosiness and freedom from the scrutiny of unsym-

pathetic eyes. There Cupid was exposed to public observation in the greatest caravansary of a notoriously scandal-loving and fashionable sanatorium. Love seemed impossible in the grand drawing-room, where dowdy dowagers and highly-acidulated spinsters stabbed reputations with their knitting-needles; utterly impracticable in the noisy *salle à manger*, with the everlasting 'Yes, sah!' of the German waiters. In the conservatory there were always some gouty old men, scandalously wealthy, talking about the virtues of the medicinal waters which they had come to Spaville to drink; too late, in many instances, to dilute the numerous bottles of rich Regina they imbibed years ago. Even the hall porter was a magnificent personage, with a marvellous expanse of shirt-front. He bore a semi-ecclesiastical, semi-aristocratic appearance. You hardly knew whether to regard him as a duke or a bishop. You felt constrained to address him respectfully as 'Sir,' and wondered, with great fear and trembling at the heart, whether such a superior being would not regard your modest *honorarium* of half-a-crown with lofty disdain. One lost one's name and became a numeral inside such an establishment. I never heard Miss Blanche Whitney's number, but Mr. Frank Fairlie was, I know, 'skied,' as they say at the Royal Academy, in 'No. 593.' The figures, however, do not affect the story.

If the stately interior and sense of general splendour of the Caven-

dish was fatal to sentiment, not so Spaville itself. Spaville is the home of romance. The neighbourhood might have been specially invented for lovers. The shady pine-woods, which clothe the bold hills that close round the watering-place, like investing lines on every side, have serpentine walks; and even such a stern political economist as Mr. John Ruskin has written in *Fors Clavigera* of the deep, secluded, stream-silvered valleys of Spaville that in them 'you might expect to catch sight of Pan, Apollo, and the Muses;' while, in addition to all this, there are beautiful gardens, such as that emotional impostor, Claude Melnotte, might have painted to the confiding Pauline, and asked, 'Dost thou like the picture? together with a Dome musical with Mendelssohn's melodies and fragrant with flowers. So fatal, indeed, is the spirit of flirtation in these Hesperidean Gardens that the Dome grows its own orange-blossoms for the numerous betrothals that are here brought about each season.

Miss Blanche Whitney and Mr. Frank Fairlie did not escape these facilities for flirtation. The young people were thrown into each other's society at the Cavendish. He had come down from chambers in town to kill a few days with his uncle, a wealthy silk-spinner of Manchester, who rolled in riches and a bath-chair, and whom Frank irreverently styled 'the Cocoon' when speaking of his avuncular relative to Miss Blanche. Her papa was having the racking pains of rheumatic gout washed out of him at the hot baths, for which Spaville has been famous ever since the Roman occupation, and he hoped to leave his crutches behind him as a practical testimonial of the healing qualities of the thermal springs. Frank Fairlie was a good-looking, athletic, clever young fellow, broad of

shoulder, blue of eye, blonde of beard, just a girl's ideal of a brave handsome Englishman. Blanche Whitney, although she had not, perhaps, what a painter would consider a single perfect feature in her face, set it off with such bonny brown wavy hair, such animated hazel eyes, such a vivacious little mouth, such a winsome charm of expression, that she became absolutely beautiful, especially when she smiled, and smiling she nearly always was. No wonder that Frank Fairlie—who had in his time run unscathed the gauntlet of much female fascination, and had declared himself to be invulnerable to attack—was mortally wounded in the heart by Blanche. It was altogether done by her indefinable, but irresistible, witchery of manner. And now how leaden seemed the hours when they were separated; how fleet the time passed when they were together; how often they met 'quite by accident, you know;' what walks and talks they had in shady wooded ways; how they whispered sweet confessions and confidences in the sylvan solitude of the limestone dales, with only the silent and listening leaves to hear their story!

They had just returned to the Cavendish one evening from one of these romantic rambles, and were as loth to leave each other as lovers generally are, from when a certain young couple in Capulet's garden wished each other 'a thousand times good-night,' to these steam-engine degenerate days of breaches of promise and divorce courts. They promenaded the deserted corridor of the hotel. That, at least, was better than the frigid society of the drawing-room, the unappreciative atmosphere of the coffee-room. Both our young people were in a merry mood. They were full of the light spirits and audacious confidence that belong

to youth and hope, and love and health. After a few turns along the carpeted passage, Frank remarked, in his happy careless manner, pausing at the bottom of the hydraulic elevator,

'I say, pet, shouldn't you like a ride on the lift? It's perfectly safe.'

'O yes,' she said, with a gay little laugh. 'It would be so awfully adventurous, don't you know.'

'Then we'll go up.'

They started, and between the third and fourth station or floor *en route* stopped.

'It has been the dream of my life—' What more he said we shall not report.

The elevator had paused hardly a minute when the night-porter passed along the corridor. He noticed that the lift was not at the bottom as it should be. To prevent any possible accident, he fastened it safely and walked away. The occupants of the lift suspended *in medio*, like Mahomet's coffin, could move the machine neither one way nor the other. They could not alight on any landing. They were prisoners in a dark funnel. Perhaps they might remain in that terrible predicament all night. The situation, though excruciatingly farcical, did not present its humorous aspect to Blanche and Frank. The affair was somewhat compromising, too. Frank had placed Miss Whitney and himself in a pretty dilemma. Cool and collected as a rule, in this position he was utterly embarrassed. What could be done?

Ten minutes afterwards a Scotch gentleman, the director of a bank which was soon afterwards notorious as the scene of a terrible financial tragedy, when passing the lift, heard a piece of money fall. Perhaps it was his thrifty Caledonian love of the 'bawbee,' per-

haps it was to avert the pecuniary danger impending, that he dropped on his knees and began to search the carpet diligently. He found the coin, and also one or two others which had doubtless fallen previously. They were two florins and a shilling. The bank director was rising from his devotional attitude when another florin fell down the hoist. Two half-crowns followed in swift succession, and were as quickly appropriated. Then lo! half a sovereign and a sovereign were dropped slowly; and he was greedily awaiting for more auriferous manna falling, when the manager of the Cavendish, a very little man for such a big building, put in an appearance.

'What is the matter, Mr. Mac-Closky?' he inquired. 'I hope, sir, you are not unwell?'

'O no! I am just engaged in picking up some money which some one is kindly dropping down the well. It will help to pay my bill, so I am grateful for it,' he said, with a Scotch effort at 'wut.'

'Why, the lift is not in its place,' exclaimed the manager, startled at the discovery. 'Where's the night-porter? Robinson!'

'Here, sir!' said that functionary, turning up with prompt obedience.

'What about this lift, Robinson?'

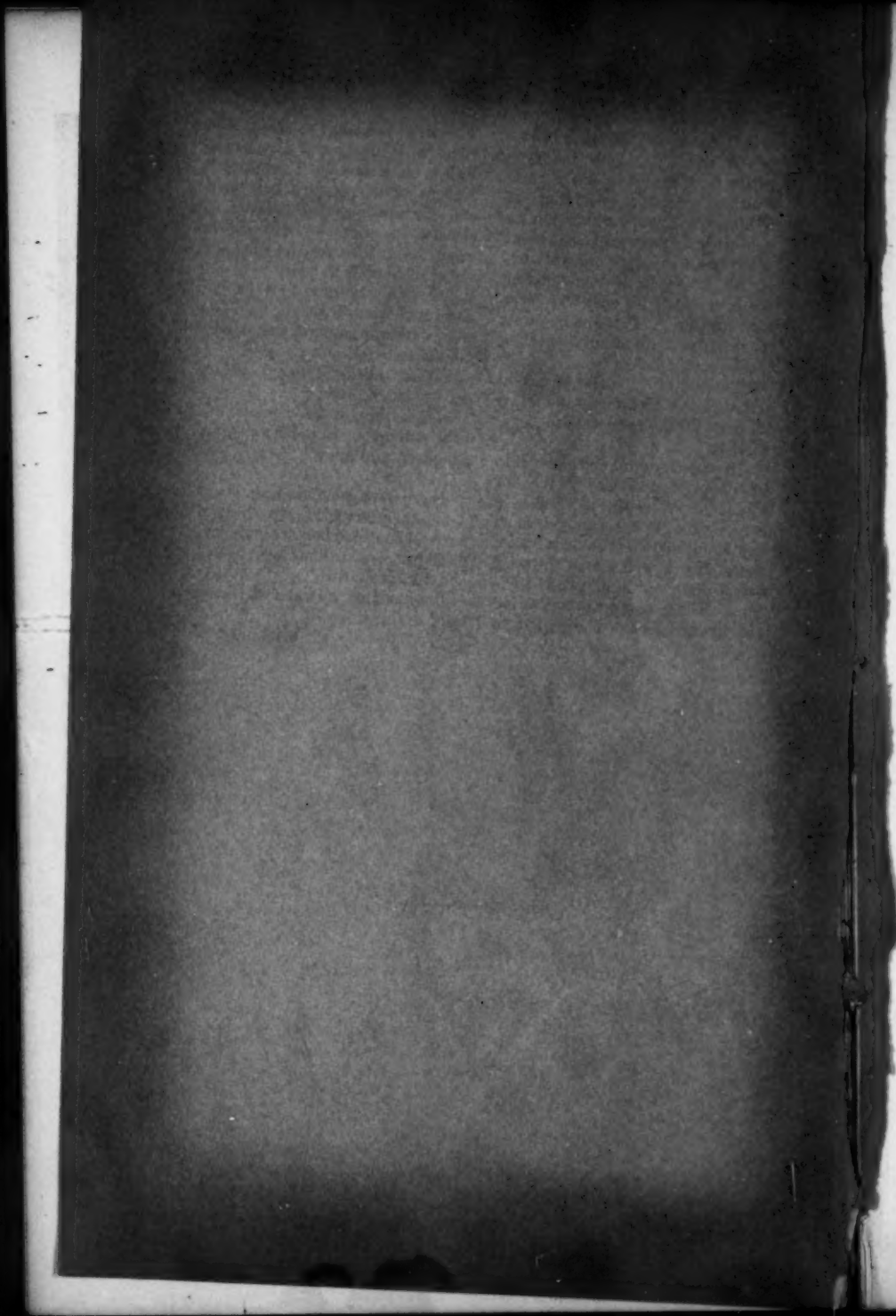
'Well, sir, I knows nothing at all about it, and that's all I does know. I saw that the lift was not right, sir; so I scotches it, and meant to ask the day-porter about it when he comes in the morning, sir. I knows nothing, and that's all I does know.'

During these explanations the ladies and gentlemen issued forth from the coffee-room and drawing-room close by. A few, noticing the Scotch gentleman still on his knees, concluded that he had been seized with a sudden spasm of ill-



LOVE IN A LIFT.

From the Story.



ness. Soon an alarming report was spread. Curiosity and sympathy were aroused, and a small crowd of spectators, including Mr. Whitney, a severe-looking gentleman with no nonsense about him, and 'the Cocoon,' were gathered round the scene of this innocent comedy. Only too soon was curiosity gratified. There came from above an earnest entreaty, pathetic in its very humour.

'Let us down now, there's a good fellow. For Heaven's sake let us down. I'll give you some more to-morrow.'

The manager ordered the bolt to be removed, and slowly the lift glided down with its confused cargo. Slowly her dainty *bottines* and his drab gaiters came in view; there was a glimpse of bronzed velvet dress and light tweed trousers. There was great twittering among the ladies. The gentlemen

whispered ominously. Now Miss Blanche Whitney and Mr. Frank Fairlie stood revealed: he with a nervous twitching on a pale face, and she blushing and looking as abashed as does my Lady Teazle when she is discovered behind the screen in Sheridan's play.

Mr. Whitney glared; 'the Cocoon' was white with rage. The angry father, in a paroxysm of passion, accosted Frank:

'What the devil do you mean, sir, by such conduct?'

'O, nothing,' he stammered. 'I'd b-b-better m-m-marry your daughter, you know.'

There was a quiet marriage about a month afterwards, and the sun never shone upon happier bride and bridegroom than Blanche Whitney and Frank Fairlie.

But that lift is watched like a thief to this hour.

STREPHON.

THE MYSTERY IN PALACE GARDENS.

BY MRS. J. H. RIDDELL.

CHAPTER XXXI.

'THOU ART THE MAN.'

LONDON society had returned to the English metropolis. If 'every one' was not in town, at least most persons had come up for the short season before Christmas. Seaside resorts had resumed their normal air of dulness; tourists had flocked back from the Continent; all the inland watering-places were deserted; the upper ten thousand were either at their estates in the country or in their houses in the West-end streets and squares; almost without exception, the upper hundred thousand were back in town, to the great contentment of tradespeople and the satisfaction of country cousins, who liked to see the fine equipages and the fashionable ladies in the Park.

Lady Moffat was back, of course, likewise — certainly not very strong; more restless than ever; more irritable, were such a change possible, and yet with a strangely subdued expression upon her face at times which filled Rachel with wonder.

Not that her mother gave her many opportunities for noticing her countenance. The dislike Lady Moffat had always entertained for her first-born seemed, during her absence, to have developed into actual abhorrence. That astute observer, Miss Banks, watching the pair with eyes that apparently were devoid of speculation, mentally remarked:

'She looks as if she both hated and feared the girl. I must find

out what the mystery is in this household.'

But time passed on, and Miss Banks remained as wise as ever. She tried to pump Rachel, but the girl had nothing to tell her.

'Mamma was never very fond of me,' she confessed, in answer to a sympathetic remark on the part of the spinster. 'I do not know why; perhaps some day she may love me better. O Miss Banks, if I only knew how to please her!'

So far as Sir John was concerned, he certainly found an improvement in his wife. She seemed to have lost that sudden mania for visiting and being visited; the trouble now was to get her to go out at all. The doctor said she wanted rousing, and Sir John was always proposing something which he hoped might effect that purpose. All in vain. For hours Lady Moffat would sit doing nothing, saying nothing; then perhaps starting up suddenly, she would throw a shawl over her head, and pace the terrace till it seemed as though she would with her restless feet wear out the very tiles.

'It is all on the nerves, my dear,' Miss Banks would say to Rachel. 'Don't take any notice of it.'

Miss Banks was much at Holyrood House in those days; even Sir John seemed glad of her presence. He felt it was better for the girls to have such companionship than none. She acted as a sort of break-water between the ocean of Lady Moffat's impatience and the rest

of the household; and she was very good and kind to Rachel. Sir John was grateful to her for that.

'If you do not soon go to hear Mr. Woodham preach, Sir John,' she said one evening, 'you will lose your opportunity. He is going to leave St. Theresa's.'

'Why?' asked Lady Moffat, with a sudden interest. She had never quite ceased cherishing the hope of one day being mother to a viscountess; and though of late Miss Banks had thrown cold water on the project, she still cherished a belief Mr. Woodham might be secured for Edwina, and that he would some day succeed to the title.

'Can't agree with the vicar,' explained Miss Banks. 'I believe their views do not coincide; and it is whispered, besides, that Mr. Woodham preaches far too well to please his chief. A sermon of his about Elijah gave mortal offence, it seems, to that gentleman. At all events, he is going; so, Sir John, if you want to hear him, you really ought to lose no more time.'

'Well,' answered Sir John, 'I do want to hear him, and I should have gone long ago, only you know my opinions differ from his.'

'What can that matter?' said Lady Moffat.

'Not much, I admit,' he answered good-humouredly, willing to avoid a scene. 'Should you like to hear him, Mira?'

'Of course,' she answered.

'Then shall we go together next Sunday morning?' he asked.

'I don't think he preaches next Sunday morning,' said Miss Banks; 'but I will find out and let you know. Of course you are aware, Sir John, you will have to be temporarily divorced from your wife while in church. I mean,' she added, laughing at the sur-

prise expressed in his face, 'you will not be allowed to sit together.'

'Well, we should have to separate if we went to a synagogue,' answered Sir John; and he continued talking till the fierce light had died away from his wife's eyes.

'Then you really will go?' said Miss Banks at last.

'O yes, we really will go,' answered Lady Moffat; and accordingly, upon the Sunday week following, they repaired to St. Theresa's.

Incredible though the fact may seem, Sir John Moffat had never before entered a Ritualistic church. In many respects he was, as Miss Banks said, 'sadly behind the times,' and a new fashion in religion had as little attraction for him as a new *mode* in female dress.

The old lights would have more than sufficed him had he only truly followed where they led.

He could scarcely understand, and he certainly felt no sympathy with, these new faiths, which seemed to his mind little better than a return to the idolatry of the Jews, which their prophets denounced, and for which God punished them. At least, he regarded the Ritualistic movement as a childish attempt to play with edged weapons. 'Our forefathers fought and died to rescue us from the very evils these people would bring upon the land once again,' he was wont to say. And when he saw worshippers pouring into one of the highest of high churches, as he often did when his way lay through a particular street in London, he was wont to smile and think of the old Scotch woman who, in Lincluden Abbey, flung a stool at a clergyman who affected Romish doctrines.

Often he thought, in his quiet way, of the roofless church, the

quiet graveyard, the priest and the hearers, all in their graves; the calm river winding under the grassy hill, on which stood the ruins of the abbey; and considered it might almost provoke speech from the dead to see how the present generation toy with questions once held to be of life and death, and to concern not merely the welfare of England, but the whole happiness of eternity.

But they were now within the church. For the first moment he could see nothing distinctly, the change from the clear frosty light of day to the gloom that obtained inside the beautiful building was so great.

Stained-glass windows darkened the face even of noon; the nave was so long that, though many candles burnt upon the altar, they seemed but as little twinkling points of brightness in the far distance. Under the then vicar gas was not permitted inside the building; lamps burned with a softened and mysterious light, giving to the interior an effect which at first sight was wonderfully impressive. The silent worshippers, almost all kneeling; the light arches and slender pillars and delicate tracery of the stonework, all suggested to the eye rather than garishly revealed; the figures of the acolytes flitting about the chancel; the mingled smell of incense and the fragrance of flowers; the vessels of gold and silver gleaming on the altar; the glittering crucifix; the rich embroidery, hung wherever draperies could be employed,—affected Sir John curiously, touched him as a great pageant sways the hearts of the masses.

With gliding noiseless footsteps the verger preceded them up the aisle. He knew Lady Moffat by sight, and although theoretically all assembled inside those walls

were considered equal, practically those who were best off in the outer world found themselves most carefully considered within the church; for which reason this attendant spirit took the newcomers up to one of the higher places, where, gravely motioning the lady to the right and the gentleman to the left, he retraced his quiet way to the door.

If he had not been well instructed before concerning this matter of etiquette, Sir John might have felt puzzled; but recollecting the arrangement Miss Banks mentioned, he took his place on the male side of the aisle, whilst Lady Moffat for a moment seemed to become merged amongst a mass of silks and laces and flowers and feathers on the other.

He bowed his head and prayed earnestly; she knelt and thought how much nicer a good roomy family pew would be than those nasty narrow little benches, where she was squeezed between two dowagers, and knew her velvet dress was being crushed and ruined. She had put it on new that morning, and knew it would never look so well again.

A soft strain of music, a sound of distant harmony coming nearer and nearer. The congregation arose with one accord, making a noise in simultaneously doing so like a ship cutting her way through water or a great bird passing swiftly through the air.

Sir John stood up with the rest. He did not in the least comprehend what was coming, but he considered it right and civil to conform to the manners and customs of those around him.

The tones of the organ (unseen) waxed louder, the notes of the chant became clearer. Sir John felt as if he were dreaming; the dim light, the illuminated altar, the deft young acolytes, touching

one candle and then another, till all set about the chancel leaped suddenly into flame; a door he had not before perceived opening by no visible agency, and revealing, as in a side scene, a procession of choristers, slowly advancing and singing as they came on.

It seemed to the unaccustomed eyes of the man who gazed that the procession was endless; on and on and on—first very small boys, then those of a larger growth, then youths taller still, then young men, then great portly fellows, then ascetic-looking priests. The choir-boys and men, children and adults, were all clad in white. A flock of doves could not have looked purer as they passed in their snowy garments up the chancel, each bowing to the altar, each subsiding into his place and drooping his head amongst billows of drapery.

The priests were arrayed differently; according to their degree, they wore garments varying from the plainest to the richest. Wonderful were the adornments of one who knelt before the altar, with his back to the congregation. Marvellous did it seem to one accustomed to a simpler ritual to see men decked out with lace, to watch the loose and awkward stride of those who crossed the chancel, cumbered with unwonted skirts. But not one-half so strange did the splendour of the robes appear to Sir John as the genuflexions, which seemed to his different faith as meaningless as the prostration of a Hindoo to Vishnu.

The service began. He did not perceive much of the after-play—crossing, bowing, bending; these things passed him by, because, with eyes lowered, with face covered, he prayed where another might have looked on. He had not come to criticise; he had not

come to hear the music or to look upon a show. The way of worshipping the Almighty within those walls truly was not his way, but if some storm-tossed souls were able to find safe anchorage in those unlikely waters, what was he that he should smile because others were different from himself?

There had been a time when the old Covenanter blood which flowed in his veins would have risen in hot rebellion at such Popish practices, when many a text would have recurred to memory denouncing idolatry and all idolatrous practices. But he had so long been driving before the winds and the waves, that he felt powerless to criticise, impotent to condemn. He could not thank God he was not as others; the one passionate cry that he uttered to Heaven was, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner.'

Sometimes he caught himself wondering how it was with many a one there. Under the purple and fine linen were there weary hearts throbbing? Not known of men, were there tired souls repentant of sin, remorseful for error; unseen save by God what cancers were consuming their vitality! Never to be told here, what sorrows and tragedies, what griefs and struggles, what troubles and disappointments, lay hidden away under silk and velvet, and the external signs of wealth and the worldly semblance of complete prosperity!

Why, even under the embroidered robes and the priestly functions a worm might be gnawing; sorrow tearing the quivering flesh. As he sat, he thought of Eli ministering before the Lord, his mind disturbed, his heart broken by the iniquity of his sons; and he marvelled whether amongst those within the chancel there

might not be one whose soul was even then crying to God in his agony. Unconsciously, perhaps, but still surely, his own sin, his own misery, his own repentance had drawn him nearer and nearer, closer and closer to the Maker he had offended; and as he attained to that knowledge which is perfected alone through suffering, he grew better to understand his fellow-men, and to comprehend more thoroughly their need, their silence, their suffering, their aspirations, their petitions, and the comfort and the strength the Almighty gives as surely and as wonderfully as daily bread.

Though Sir John was in many respects a weak, he was not an impressionable, man. Music did not touch him much, he had never stood before a painting rapt and forgetful; it was only through suffering, as has been before said, he learned to love Nature. As a great crime makes for the moment an otherwise commonplace individual notorious, so a grievous sin removed Sir John Moffat from the atmosphere of ordinary conventionality in which otherwise he must have moved and had his being.

Error had made him charitable and pitiful to error, sorrow had quickened his perception of human sorrow, remorse had taught him to understand the devious ways, the thousand circuitous routes of the worm that eats all the happiness out of life; trouble had made him thoughtful; guilt, religious—religious in a wide comprehensive sense.

Can man know good till he has eaten of evil? can he understand the bitterness of the fruit till he has tasted its sweetness? Ah, friends, I think not, and I believe no man may estimate the truth of the Bible till out of the fulness of his own experience he can declare,

'I know that from thorns a man may not gather grapes, nor from thistles, figs.'

Sir John could have told this much, at any rate. He knew just what sin could do for any man, just the grain tares were certain to produce. He had done well, as the world counts success; all men thought him fortunate; he was envied, respected. Ah, look at that worn face, at that head all sprinkled with gray, at those nervously clasped hands, at that humble abandonment of attitude which God knew was only an outward and visible sign of the contrite and broken heart within, and say, was the fruit he gathered goodly or the reverse? the grain into which he thrust his sickle one any man should desire to harvest?

The Litany was omitted, or rather it never at St. Theresa's formed a portion of the forenoon service; this stranger missed it. He had learned to love that fervent outpouring of the heart, though at first it had seemed to him strange and methodical. It is the one portion of the Church formula which grows upon the hearts of Dissenters and which recommends itself to their minds and feelings, no matter how much the balder faith they may have walked in from childhood rebels against the other forms and ceremonies of the religion as by law established.

Singing—it seemed to Sir John the service was nothing but singing—all music, gesture, mumble; he could scarce hear the words of the lessons, epistle, gospel; the prayers, save that he knew what they were by heart, must have been to him as Greek.

More singing; this time a sad plaintive hymn, with an intelligible air; and while it was in progress a figure he knew walked slowly down the chancel, and, ascending the pulpit-stairs, knelt.

No nonsense about that man's movements, no awkward stride, no ill-learned lesson, no seeming consciousness of the eyes fastened upon him. No millinery about his person; nothing save the plain white surplice and scarlet hood: his own dark hair, his own pale face supplied all the rest.

He knelt—Sir John's gaze followed him—he rose and stood still while the choristers finished, then he said, as was the custom at that church, 'In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost;' but he did not cross himself. He stood quite erect, he looked down the long aisles, and he said,

'And Nathan said to David, Thou art the man. In the twelfth chapter of second Samuel, and the seventh verse, it is so written, THOU ART THE MAN.'

Could he have chosen no other text? was not Holy Writ long enough and wide enough for him to have selected any verse save that?

For one swift instant Sir John's eyes never left the preacher; then they turned involuntarily across the aisle. Lady Moffat was settling herself into her place, smoothing out the folds of her velvet dress, the peach-like softness he so well remembered on her still fair face, the special beauty of her profile brought out by the subdued light of a window near to where she sat.

'THOU ART THE MAN,' repeated the preacher; and as David slung a stone into the brazen forehead of his Philistine foe, so he dropped that statement deep down into the heart of one of his hearers.

'The practice of reading the Scriptures piecemeal, so prevalent amongst those who read the Scriptures at all,' began Mr. Woodham, 'has this great disadvantage, that a general knowledge of the characters mentioned and a clear comprehension of the incidents re-

corded are thereby rendered impossible.

'Suppose that any one tried to read a novel as many persons think they can peruse the Bible—a chapter here, a verse there, with long intervals of time moreover between these desultory studies—is it likely that he could ever arrive at a true idea of the story, or of the nature of the men and women whose actions are told in its pages?

'A paragraph on one page, a few sentences in another, a striking scene perhaps at the end of a volume, or a dramatic position which happens to strike the fancy,—how could any just idea of an author's meaning and intention be derived from such a course of procedure?

'And yet this is how many even very religious people treat the Bible—indeed, so far as my own experience and observation goes, I might say it is how most people treat it—and the consequence is they utterly fail to grasp its meaning, whether as a complete history of a given period of time, or as a series of narratives of the men who lived during that period, and left their mark for good or for evil upon that history.

'It is not likely that a single person now present is unacquainted with the incidents in the chapter from which my text is taken; the poor man's ewe-lamb, the rich man's haughty greed, the king's swift sympathy with the wronged, the crushing rejoinder of Nathan, the terrible statement, "The sword shall never depart from thine house"—the fiat, "The child also that is born unto thee shall surely die;" the sickness of the child; David's anguish, his tears, his fastings, his prayers, his final resignation; these things, I say, are all familiar in your ears as a tale oft told; but

that which is not familiar is a comprehension of the man to whom Nathan came, he who was raised upon high, the anointed of the Lord, the sweet psalmist of Israel. It is, first, this insight into that strange and complex nature I wish to give you; and second, I desire to speak of the sin for which so terrible a punishment was decreed. It were idle to say such matters are not to be mentioned in the pulpit when we know they are talked of in every home, not with bated breath and the horror they merit and the human pity they should evoke, but as dishes of scandal eagerly served and greedily swallowed; tid-bits of gossip to be carried from house to house, to be canvassed and gloated over, as though the sin and the sorrow, the suffering, the remorse, the ruin were as grateful to the minds of Christians in the nineteenth century as the struggles of men and wild beasts in the arena were pleasant to the nobles and matrons of imperial Rome.

There was a rustle in the building, a swish amongst the women, as when a breeze disturbs the fallen leaves; a stir through the men, as though they were rousing themselves to a keener attention.

Not a man or a woman present but knew perfectly well the idea which suggested this theme to the preacher. A great scandal had arisen—one of those terrible stories of domestic shipwreck that periodically delight modern society, and increase the sale of newspapers, seem very shocking to honest-minded folks, and very piquant and amusing to cads of high and low degree.

The principals in the drama were people well known to many in the congregation, and those who did not happen to be personally acquainted with them were

intimate with friends of the respective families. Mr. Woodham, it was well understood, strongly disapproved of the morbid interest taken in the affair. He had not hesitated to express censure in quarters where such censure was unusual and likely to give offence; in no faltering terms was his voice raised in reprobation of the sparrow-like chattering there had been over this delicious grain of scandal. He had denounced the gloating over each fresh detail of shame and sorrow in language society is not much accustomed to hear nowadays, which, so said his suave vicar, might have befitted the times of Wesley or Luther, but could scarcely, with advantage, be reproduced in the midst of a highly educated and refined age. It was said he had taken his hat, and straightway walked out of a drawing-room, when a fashionable lady persisted in asking his opinions concerning the 'sad affair,' and he had not scrupled to style the court over which Sir James Hannen presides a disgrace to the community, and to add it was only because of the hardness of men's hearts divorce could be considered permissible at all.

It was therefore conceived by most of his hearers that he now meant to vindicate the position he had taken up, and make David's transgression a mere peg upon which to hang matters more personal to himself; but such was far from his intention. The late scandal had indeed suggested to him the idea of speaking some very plain truths to a congregation over-fond of having their ears tickled and their foibles humoured. But when he came to devote his whole mind to the narrative, he had found the touching brevity of that dark wrong committed so

long ago—yet brought so near by the human interest, which never grows old, threading every line of the terrible tragedy—so impress his imagination, so overmaster his own narrower experiences, that he had almost lost himself in following the footsteps of the poet-king, as he wandered from probity to error, from the heights of magnanimous self-renunciation to the lowest depths of cowardly treachery.

As in the sermon to which Miss Banks had referred he traced the career of Elijah in words that stirred the hearts of his hearers, and for a moment hurried the movements of their pulses, languid from long prosperity, cold from the thralldom of fashion,—so now he carried along the stream of his eloquence an attention not easy to arouse; an interest difficult, as he well knew, to awaken.

But he was not thinking then either of his audience or himself. His thoughts were in Palestine, with the young lad watching those few sheep in the wilderness. He forgot the modern Babylon wherein his own lot was cast; the men and women living in it, who, like the Athenians, are from very weariness and empty-mindedness for ever crying aloud to be told something new. Though his outward eyes rested on rank and beauty, on everything which could please the sight and delight the superficial mind, his imagination showed him scenes of deeper interest, of wide experiences, of wild excitement; and in burning words he tracked the course of David's life from the time when he was anointed by Samuel, as he hoped some day in his own person to eagerly track the paths he followed when fleeing for his life, when speeding to victory.

A wonderful story, truly;

stranger than any fiction, wilder in its romance than the heart of man could have conceived; so full of adventure, of danger, of honour, of reward, of anxiety, of peril, that the listeners held their breath as the preacher passed rapidly from point to point of that marvellous biography.

He touched on the inconsistencies of the man's character; the at first sight almost irreconcilable qualities a novelist would have tried to explain and analyse, but which the Scripture narrative passes over without a word of comment. The audacity and modesty, the strength and weakness, the courage and the cowardice, the force and the feebleness, the boundless generosity and the incredible vindictiveness; all these opposite traits Mr. Woodham brought before his hearers, showing the contradictions in the psalmist's nature, and proving that, throughout the whole of his troubled career, he never met with so dangerous, mighty, and insidious a foe as himself.

It was a fine discourse. Even those present who were accustomed to run after good preachers, and follow clerical orators from abbey to chapel and cathedral to church, subsequently confessed they were, for the time, carried 'off their feet' by the words of this man's address.

Here were no tricks of elocution; no practised action with which to impress his utterances on his hearers. His manner was simplicity itself; his gestures few and far between; and his language, to those accustomed to a more redundant style, might have seemed almost bald. But the latter was not severe from any lack of words in which to clothe his ideas—rather it impressed an attentive listener with the feeling of abundant vitality.

In following him the hearer felt he was not putting out all his strength; that behind the measured sentences, the calm composure, the wonderful fluency, which neither hurried nor hesitated, there was a strong reserve force. And that force was displayed when he came to speak of the murder of Uriah, of the sin for which divine justice mingled bitter with the cup of David's whole future life.

Had such an ending been foretold when, tending 'those few sheep' in the wilderness, he looked eagerly onward over the years to come; when he trod the hills of Palestine young and humble, strong, valiant, faithful, he might well, like Hazael, have asked, 'Is thy servant a dog that he should do this?'

And yet, like Hazael, he did do it.

When Saul sought to destroy him, he spared his adversary's life. When he lay sleeping undreaming of danger, the brave soldier, the sweet singer of Israel, cut off the skirt of the king's robe, and took the cruse of water and the spear from beside his bolster, but let the sleeper dream on unharmed; and now the same man set himself coolly to compass the death of his friend, one of the thirty-and-three who fetched him, at the peril of their own safety, that draught of longed-for water from the well of Bethlehem, but which, when they brought it, he refused to drink, saying,

'Far be it, O Lord, that I should do this. Is not this the blood of the men that went in jeopardy of their lives?'

The great argument which has always been used in defence of the poet-king's treachery, Mr. Woodham would not admit as much, if any, excuse for David's baseness.

The Almighty, speaking through His servant Nathan, takes no notice of the penalty incurred by either man or woman, while the king himself, by his silence, evidently feels such penalty to be quite beside the question.

He had sinned; and in the train of that sin followed all the vices which constitute the dark retinue of guilt, amongst them deceit, cowardice, treachery.

What a picture was that the preacher drew of David's heart while he wrote his letter to Joab; of his blunted conscience; his craven fears; his abject terror; his forgetfulness of the God who had raised him to be ruler over Israel; his ingratitude to the servant who had been true to him in his time of need!

All this wickedness planned deliberately also! It might be in the extremest exigency; but still with plenty of time to plot, to contrive, to deliberate, to draw back.

And then the hypocrisy with which he bade the messenger who, fulfilling Joab's command (Joab who afterwards thrust Absalom through the heart while he was yet alive), told the king, 'Uriah the Hittite is dead,' say to him who sent the tidings,

'Let not this thing displease thee, for the sword devoureth one as well as another.'

Ah, had Uriah but died by the sword fairly and honestly, happy might David have been in the after time which he lived through, distracted by bitter feuds and hatred amongst his own children, by the rebellion of Absalom, by the intrigues of Adonijah, so that his last days were disturbed by the machinations of those who would have ousted Solomon from the succession.

A mere outline this of the sermon; the alightest skeleton of a

discourse which the preacher's genius and earnestness made flesh and blood—a living breathing humanity. Only a story of the sin of a sinner; but such a sinner! A story well-nigh three thousand years old; yet one which fell on the ears of those who heard fresh as though the transgression had been of yesterday, the punishment still to be wrought out.

'There are persons,' so Mr. Woodham said, at the end of his sermon, 'at the present day, as no doubt there have been persons in all days, who think lightly of the sin which called down on David's head the wrath of God. I cannot imagine why this should be. It baffles me to imagine how it has come to pass that reasonable human beings should think or speak lightly of such guilt. We have seen what his sin wrought for the psalmist: not merely the death of the child, which is the point where most people seem to think his chastisement ended, but the long series of disasters that followed his footsteps from the time of Uriah's death till he himself waxed old and stricken in years, and the days drew nigh that he should die.

'There is an idea abroad—why, it would be difficult to say—that, under the Gospel dispensation, this crime is not so heinous as under the law. Now this is a total mistake. If there be any difference it is, as modern society is constituted, a more cruel wrong than in the time of Uriah. God forbid I should say the tie of wife and child was less strong in that far-away time, when most men had several wives and many children. Not a line of the Old Testament but forbids this opinion; but yet it seems to me that, in our own case, here amongst us, with a better light shining across

our lives, with a purer day gladdening our existence, the guilt of adultery is greater than even under the old law, when it was enacted that death should be the penalty for such an offence, that "evil might be put away from Israel."

'My friends, do not deceive yourselves. If, under a more merciful dispensation, the punishment is lighter, the crime in the sight of God is none the less. Reading the divine law by the light of history, there is but one in its consequences worse to be found, and that David did not commit. If you bear this fact well in mind, you will be better able to understand the man.

'In an age steeped in idolatry, ruler over a people given at the smallest provocation, or indeed at none, to turn and inquire of gods that were not gods, and honour any save Him who made the heaven and the earth, David stood firm.

'I do not say he was always faithful; men such as he rarely are. It seems incredible to us, looking back over his story, that he should have forgotten so often that God who was his God; nevertheless, this remains: he never turned aside to strange altars; he did not make his sons and daughters pass through the fire to Moloch, he offered no human sacrifices; so far as in his weak humanity lay, he obeyed God, he worshipped God, he loved God.'

Mr. Woodham added but a few words more. He had one great merit sometimes not possessed even by famous preachers. He knew when to stop; he did not weaken the force of the story he had told by recapitulating its details. He had reproduced the man's weakness and his strength, his sin and his repentance; he had given many amongst the congregation something to think of if they

ever meant to think at all ; and as he uttered his last sentence he cast a strange, lingering, yearning look around, as though he would fain have learnt if any heart was touched, any conscience wrung by that terrible narrative of sin and treachery, of punishment and repentance.

The vast crowd swept out ; nothing common or unclean trailed its long skirts down those paved aisles, I warrant you. No Magdalene among that assemblage, covering her tear-stained face with shrouding hair ; no Bathsheba the world wot of ; no sinner man could distinguish, walking with downcast eyes and pallid face out from the presence of God, back into the weary dreary world.

Certainly no man or woman present would have imagined Lady Moffat had ever wandered from the path of virtue as, handsome and well dressed, she stood on the pavement exchanging greetings with a very few intimate friends, and bows with those who did not feel privileged to adventure a warmer greeting.

She was looking remarkably well, better in health than had been the case for some time previously, handsome, prosperous, the very ideal of worldly happiness. A slight colour tinged her cheeks ; her wonderful eyes drew admiring, almost startled, looks from many persons who that day saw Lady Moffat for the first time, and remembered afterwards they had so seen her. In her sables and her velvets, in her rich attire, in the very zenith of her magnificent beauty, who could have guessed she had ever stood in the morning twilight by the gate of that mean house in the Romford-road, poor, lonely, and, so far as any efficient help went, friendless ?

A change here indeed, my readers, if you think of it, one

only possible in a great city—a metamorphosis that could never have taken place save in the solitude of a multitude, in the utter privacy and secrecy which can be found and compassed nowhere except in the very middle of a mighty crowd.

Thus my lady, with the winter sunshine streaming full upon her unveiled face, with her trailing robes, with her costly furs, with her air of having been ‘a person’ which subsequent acquaintance gradually dispelled, with her haughty carriage, with her rare smile, a sight indeed for those who loved the aristocracy—whether of birth or money or both—to feast upon as they passed modestly upon the outside of the pavement, or looked back upon such a vision of beauty and prosperity as they crossed the road opposite St. Theresa’s.

As for Sir John, the while he came slowly out tangled amongst an awkward squad of men, he did not look so much unlike the fairy godmother who had wrought such a transformation as might rashly be supposed.

No artist ever represented Cinderella’s benefactress as a personally attractive individual, dressed in the extreme of the fashion, and diverting to herself that attention which the glass-slippered young woman properly engrossed.

In similar manner the magician who, with a wave of his wand, changed Mira Palthorpe into Lady Moffat ; the narrow house—nothing save her husband’s love made beautiful—into a great mansion in Palace Gardens ; the old red shawl into costliest sables ; the poordress which fell in such graceful folds around her young slight figure into silks and velvets a queen might have worn ; the humble surroundings into such luxury as could better be catalogued by an

auctioneer than one so ignorant of such articles as a humble novelist; the modest and old-fashioned method of getting along the world's roads to well-appointed carriages and horses, each one of which cost over three times the salary the young fellow who lost all for love received in those far-away days,—the magician, I say, who wrought all these miracles came out of church looking, as was very fit indeed, a grim sort of wizard, hard-featured, stern-faced, gray of aspect, worn of soul.

Looking at him, my readers who are behind the scenes may conclude he found the Galatea himself had created a very doubtful blessing; that during Mr. Woodham's sermon, his thoughts having gone on a long and weary journey, he came out of church exhausted, just as Cinderella's godmother might, if mortal, have felt when the last horse was put to the coach, and the final touch added to her *protégée's* toilette.

'Are you not well, Sir John?' asked Miss Banks, posing on the pavement as one of the ladies-in-waiting.

She was quick enough to see that gray pallor, that something which, like death, had altered the fashion of the man's countenance. She saw the far-away look in his eyes, the trouble in his face, though she could not in the least comprehend what was amiss.

There stood my lady, happy, handsome, healthy. There stood Sir John, grave, gaunt, grievous of aspect, a mate unfit, apparently, for such a spouse.

'Quite well, thank you,' he answered; 'but I found the church a little close.'

'Yes, it was close,' agreed Lady Moffat. 'The smell of that stuff—'

'Incense,' mildly corrected Miss Banks.

'Yes,' went on her ladyship,

accepting the information, but not availing herself of it—'made me feel faint for a time.'

'You do not look faint now, at any rate,' remarked Sir John, glancing at his wife's bright animated face coolly and critically, without one feeling of admiration, with nothing save a wild wonder that she had ever in his eyes possessed a single charm. 'The incense was bad enough,' he added, turning to Miss Banks, 'but I really think the ladies' scents and essences were far worse. I could not have believed perfumes might become so disagreeable.'

'But you dislike all perfumes,' said Lady Moffat, in a tone which implied he had in all respects an imperfect and uncultivated taste.

'Well, yes,' he answered thoughtfully, 'perhaps I do.'

'Even the scent of flowers?' asked Miss Banks.

'I am afraid I must plead guilty,' he said, looking at the lady, who he found was gazing curiously at him.

'Many people cannot sit in the room even with a rose,' she observed carelessly. 'And what did you think of Mr. Woodham, Sir John?'

'He is a fine preacher, a very fine preacher,' replied Sir John.

'I do not care for him,' said Lady Moffat. 'I do not like him at all. He is so dreadfully long-winded.'

Sir John made no comment on this criticism, and neither did Miss Banks. Had she and Lady Moffat been alone she would have cried out, 'How delightfully original you are! you never hesitate about expressing your opinions;' but she did not care to adventure upon this sort of thing in Sir John's presence. The three were now walking quietly back to Palace Gardens, where Miss Banks was invited to partake of luncheon.

She often lunched at Holyrood House, and never without stating in her nice, candid, humble way,

'I call this dinner. I never think of having any other meal after I have had luncheon with you.'

This remark came so regularly that Mr. Simonds always instantly handed her a further supply of provisions, and immediately replenished her wine-glass. He paid the lady these and other delicate attentions for 'the sport,' and not because of any love he bore Miss Banks, of whom he spoke disparagingly in the free discussion hall below-stairs, referring to her with a fine sneer as the 'head dish' at Sir John's table.

There was nothing more noticeable about Lady Moffat than the way she stopped all conversation. Coleridge himself could scarcely have talked in her presence. Unless she was discussing some matter of dress or fashion or pleasure, she figuratively banged the door in the face of every topic upon which persons were rash enough to engage. Nothing which did not in some way or other relate to herself had the smallest attraction for her.

'She is more ignorant than her own cook,' thought Miss Banks, 'and ruder than a street arab;' but she kept these daring opinions to herself, and proceeded to make such remarks as she felt were suitable to Lady Moffat's understanding; gossip about mutual acquaintances, criticisms on bonnets and mantles, sly little hits at Mrs. This and Miss The-other, the latest news about Lady Griffin, with whom she was going to dine that evening, and speculations as to the manner of man the curate who was to replace Mr. Woodham would prove.

All the time this mild trickle of talk was proceeding from Miss

Banks' insincere old lips, Sir John stalked along in silence, wrapped in a reverie which seemed as dark as it was deep, and which absorbed him until the trio reached Holyrood House.

Arrived there he went straight to his library, and when Simonds announced luncheon was ready, excused himself from partaking of that meal.

'I feel quite sure Sir John is not well,' said Miss Banks, when this message was delivered. 'I noticed how pale he looked when he came out of church. If you remember, I asked him if he were ill.'

'I do not think there is anything the matter with him,' returned Lady Moffat; 'don't rise from table, Rachel. I won't have it. I am sure your papa would be very angry if you were to disturb him; you are so fond of putting yourself forward. No,' she continued, returning to her original text after this agreeable remark, 'he often refuses to take luncheon on Sundays, and very frequently will not have dinner on week-days. Gentlemen are odd, you know.'

'Ah,' commented Mr. Simonds to himself, 'they are not half as odd as ladies.'

He heard a good deal of this sort of thing, and though he did not approve of his master he approved less of his mistress.

Meanwhile Sir John was reading the story of that life, the like of which no dramatist ever imagined, no romance ever approached. He began it at the beginning, at the point when the youth, ruddy and of a beautiful countenance, comes last of all Jesse's sons into the presence of Samuel.

From this point he followed the narrative on: followed David from the lonely hill-side, which he must so often have thought of in his after life, from the care of

those few sheep he exchanged for the care of a whole people. He saw how those early experiences were never forgotten, how they influenced the imagery of the psalms, how the cool water and the green grass and suchlike peaceful recollections and associations recurred to memory in the midst of danger and turmoil and the thousand sorrows that encompassed his throne; he saw him go down and slay the Philistine, he heard the sweet tones of that harp he played so cunningly, he beheld him in jeopardy of his life from the mad jealousy of Saul, he read of the love passing the love of woman he felt for Jonathan, he tracked his footsteps as he fled from the king's insane vengeance—shared his perils, his fears, his privations.

A wonderful story, one which for incident never was surpassed; for hairbreadth escapes, for wild adventure, for marvellous excitement, for strange vicissitude, never has been, and never will be, equalled.

Yes, Mr. Woodham said right; such a tale to be properly understood must be taken in its entirety. From the wilderness to the palace, from the camp to the court, from the solitary midnight vigils to the pomp and circumstance of a king! What a varied life, what strange experiences, what extraordinary chances and changes! Certainly Sir John felt he had never before fully grasped the whole marvellous history, never previously comprehended the nature of the man.

He read on—still on. The glory of the day was over, and the afternoon shadows began to creep down Palace Gardens; but Sir John did not notice the passage of time.

His spirit was away from London; he paced the slopes of Palestine; he entered Jerusalem; he

followed the progress of the soldier-king; he saw him for once taking rest and refraining from going down into the battle; and, though it was all so old a tale, though thousands of years had come and gone since the actors in that wonderful drama trod the soil of Judea, it seemed fresh to him as though the incidents were being enacted then. He felt the temptation sweeping by; it seemed to rush through his own soul, as it went straight to the heart of the king. That time of soft idleness; that hour of dangerous leisure; the fair woman; the impulsive reckless man; the sin which could never be undone; the crime which begot something so far more monstrous, that God Himself smote the offender, destroying the fruit of his body for the sin of the soul.

He looked where David lay weeping and fasting, mourning for the child who was to die, burdened by the reproaches of his own conscience, bowed down by the weight of his guilt.

And so to the end. Through all the complications that vexed and harassed the king's declining days, mournfully in the gathering twilight the bitter cry, 'My son, my son!' seemed to echo about the quiet room. Torn, distracted, perplexed, his strength gone, his heart broken, the kingdoms of this world waxing small, the pageant of life growing indistinct and dim! Sir John could not see the page, for his own eyes were full of tears. The letters grew blurred and indistinct before him; he forgot where he was; forgot the book lying open he had been reading, and, covering his face with his hands, wept drops of bitterness in silence.

He did not hear the door softly open, or know that a sweet face had peeped round the screen, and

then, with a sorrowful look upon it, as quietly withdrawn. He was gone back—back into his own past. He saw before him the blue eyes of the man he had wronged; he beheld again that storm he was for ever picturing in his own fancy, and across the waste of waters could almost hear the last despairing cry for help. It grew darker still; it was now quite dark. Once again the door opened, this time not so silently. Round the screen, across the thick carpet, swept my lady.

'John,' she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder, and bringing him with that one word out from the irrevocable past to the miserable present.

'What is it?' he asked, without uncovering his face or changing his attitude.

'Why do you go reading such things?' she asked, seeing the Bible open on the table, and jumping instantly to a knowledge of how Sir John had spent the afternoon. 'What is the use of it? I cannot think what possessed that man to preach such a sermon. I know it was nothing else upset you.'

He did not answer a word. He made no movement when she closed the volume and put it away.

'Come,' she said, moving over again to his side. 'Don't sit there any longer. Fretting won't do any good; besides, what is there to fret about? Come, Miss Banks will be going almost directly.'

Herspeech was not sympathetic, but Sir John heard with some surprise a ring in her voice both of distress and anxiety.

'I will join you presently,' he replied.

'Do,' she entreated; 'and make haste. Miss Banks must leave immediately, and she will think it so strange if she does not see you.'

Sir John lifted his head, and answered,

'What can it matter whether she thinks it strange or not? Any one might imagine you were afraid of her.'

'I' cried Lady Moffat. 'I am not afraid of anybody in the world!' and she flounced out of the room, the noiseless sweep of her velvet dress in singular contrast to the hurry and irritation of her movements.

CHAPTER XXXII.

MR. WOODHAM IS ASTONISHED.

It was the next evening. Dinner at Holyrood House had been over for some little time, and before a blazing fire, with shaded lights softening down the eccentricities of the Egyptian decorations, Sir John Moffat and one guest sat talking confidentially over their wine.

At the banquet recently finished the usual skeleton had been absent, for my lady kept her room. Well as she seemed on the previous day, she was now laid up with one of those attacks which baffled the skill of her doctor and defied the penetration of those great physicians Sir John had insisted upon her consulting. One hour no woman need have desired to look better or to feel better than did Lady Moffat; the next she was prostrate with what, for want of a better name, her doctor called 'nervous irritability.' She would eat nothing, drink nothing, say nothing; but remain solitary till the malady wore itself out, or the fit of despondency passed over.

Only one clue the doctor ever was able to gain. Invariably the illness seemed to be preceded by bad dreams.

'If I only could keep from dreaming' said my lady irritably. 'I never used to dream.'

Judging from Sir John's appearance, any one would have thought he had spent his night also in wandering through some dark and terrible land peopled by ghostly phantoms of memory or fancy.

Many people in the City had asked him during the course of that day if he were ill, and Mr. Woodham, who was the only guest, could not avoid noticing at dinner the anxious glances Rachel directed across the table, and the deep abysses of abstraction into which Sir John occasionally fell, and from which he roused himself with a perceptible effort.

The two girls had dined with them, but flitted away almost the moment the last course was over. Mr. Woodham also, shortly after Simonds finally retired from the room, said he thought he had better go, as Lady Moffat was so unwell, and would have carried his suggestion into effect had not his host pressed him to remain with an earnestness there was no mistaking.

Nevertheless Sir John soon relapsed into silence, and the bulk of the conversation fell upon Mr. Woodham, who began to talk of himself and his somewhat dreary prospects—his reasons for leaving St. Theresa's, and his determination not again to accept a curacy surrounded by similar restrictions and hampered by the same forms.

He had been behind the scenes of Ritualism, and he waxed eloquent in denouncing what he considered its narrowing influences to his host, whom he had no reason to doubt belonged to the strictest of Puritan sects; and his astonishment was therefore great

when Sir John asked him if he did not think there might, after all, be some virtue in confession.

'You know we have never discussed these matters before,' went on the master of Holyrood House, 'because I always believed our opinions upon them were far as the Poles asunder.'

'Well, I must confess I was once more of a Ritualist than I am now,' said Mr. Woodham, smiling, and yet looking somewhat confused. 'I never was one thoroughly, but I felt open to conviction. Now I may say I do not think any man could convince me that the childish details, say of such a ceremonial as you saw yesterday, can really benefit the cause of true religion.'

'Conscientiously I could not take any prominent part in such a service,' went on Mr. Woodham; 'and so there is nothing for it save to look out for another curacy. My decision has grieved my mother, and will possibly injure my worldly prospects; but I felt it was impossible for me to continue at St. Theresa's and seem even tacitly to acquiesce in all the changes the vicar has lately inaugurated;' and as he concluded he looked at Sir John with a certain appeal in his expression which was completely unnoticed by that gentleman.

Instead of answering, Sir John poured himself out another glass of port and said nothing.

Mr. Woodham toyed nervously with some filberts he had taken, but which he did not seem inclined to eat. Watching his host narrowly, he saw him sink once again down, down into that strange reverie which seemed to engulf his mind as a morass might his body.

'What can he be thinking of?' thought Mr. Woodham. 'Has he lost his money, or is he going to

lose it? and involuntarily he glanced round the room which he knew another City man had decorated, wherein that other man had sat on the night when he knew his ship was gone down, and that his only chance of even personal safety was instant flight.

The idea, fleeting though it was, gave him courage to speak once more of his own more modest fortunes. He talked a little about his cousin, who might have done something for him, but who had refused to do so; of the excuses he felt should be made for a man who had lost the one possession he desired, and gained wealth and rank too late. He said he had formerly thought of joining one of the foreign missions, but that now he should like to remain in England, because his mother was not strong, and—and for other reasons, he added. He was very careful to add, he never expected to succeed to the family title.

'It is said about here, I know, freely,' he went on, 'that one day I shall be Lord Chesunt; but I assure you there is not the slightest likelihood of such a thing coming to pass. Neither should I wish to stand in my cousin's shoes. I have no desire to be great or very rich. I—'

'That was a wonderful sermon of yours yesterday,' interrupted Sir John, not in the smallest degree as a comment on Mr. Woodham's statements, but as a natural result of his own train of thought.

The clergyman looked gratified, and murmured modestly,

'It is very kind of you to think so.'

'Yes, a wonderful sermon,' repeated his host. 'You know, I have never heard you preach before.'

It is so very difficult to acknowledge praise of this sort that Mr.

Woodham remained discreetly silent.

'You have a great gift,' continued Sir John. 'I do not know that I ever listened to a discourse which made so deep an impression upon me.'

'I am very glad to hear you say that,' answered Mr. Woodham; 'for I wanted to touch some amongst the regular congregation, and you encourage me to hope I may have produced an impression even on them.'

Sir John did not reply. He was looking across the table into the dim distance of the room, where certainly there was nothing for him to see, and the strange look which had so puzzled his guest crept slowly like a shadow across his face; then, without the smallest relevancy, as it seemed, he plunged into a dissertation on the character of David. He went round and round the subject; he fenced with it, toyed with it, tore himself away, and then instantly returned to the subject, till Mr. Woodham, listening to him first amazedly and then perplexedly, could not but feel some subtle attraction he was unable to discover lay within the Bible story, that there existed an intimate connection, some near association, between the psalmist's sin and Sir John's interest in the narrative.

The two faces were a study at that moment: Mr. Woodham's severely handsome, high-bred, ascetic, with an expression upon it of the most painful and engrossing doubt and attention; Sir John's worn, hard-featured, drawn almost with the intensity of the feelings which were working in his heart.

'Suppose now,' he went on, 'there were any one amongst your congregation yesterday troubled in mind, doubtful as to his own past, seeing nothing save sorrow

in store for him in the future, should you not say it would be good if he were to tell his grief—say in confession?’ and Sir John for a moment turned his eyes towards his guest, and then as quickly averted them.

Mr. Woodham pushed his filberts aside, and laid his arm upon the table.

‘No, I should not,’ he answered. ‘I have seen how confession of that sort works, and I believe it to be a delusion and a snare. If there were such a man amongst my hearers yesterday, I can but hope he will take his trouble to God, and receive pardon from his Maker.’

‘You know,’ went on Sir John, ‘I was reared a Presbyterian, and I am a Presbyterian in most of my doctrines and ideas; yet still it seems to me—of course I am now speaking generally—that there might be sins it would be a relief to confess to man, that the reserve of even the most reticent human being might some day overleap its barrier, and feel it a necessity to give expression to feelings pent up possibly for years.’

Still with that puzzled anxious look upon his countenance, Mr. Woodham shook his head.

‘If in a moment of weakness a man were to do what you suggest, he would repent it bitterly afterwards,’ he said. ‘I do not know how it may be in the Romish Church,’ he went on; ‘but in ours most certainly I can but say to act upon such an impulse would be a fatal error. The Ritualists themselves feel that,’ he added, trying to speak lightly; ‘for they rarely tell anything in confession which might not be proclaimed from the house-tops.’

What a look it was Sir John threw upon his companion—one of appeal, reproof, entreaty, misery, and hope!

‘And yet your own Prayer-book,’ he said, in those Northern accents that cropped out whenever he was strongly moved, ‘contains the special clause that a sick person shall be moved to make a special confession of his sins if he feel his conscience troubled with any weighty matter. How do you get over that, Mr. Woodham?’

But Mr. Woodham did not try to get over it. He only placed his hand firmly on the table, and asked,

‘To what is all this tending, Sir John?’

‘Just to this,’ said Sir John, still with that uneasy glance of his eyes, that shifting uneasy expression on his face. ‘I want to tell you the story of a friend of mine; he wants it told. He desires advice; and I think, after hearing your sermon, you are just the man to give it.’

‘For God’s sake, don’t tell the story to me!’ interrupted Mr. Woodham. ‘Whoever the man may be, whatever his sin and his sorrow, don’t let him take me into his confidence *now*. It—it—might put a bar between me—and—him. O, pray, Sir John, keep silence! If the tale be an old one, let it still lie buried.’

There was silence—an awful silence. Then Sir John Moffat, looking straight in Mr. Woodham’s eyes, knew why he wanted to hear no more; and Mr. Woodham, gazing like one fascinated into that worn haggard face, understood something of the sin and the sorrow which had taken all the sap out of life, and left existence the dry wood he had always vaguely understood that man felt it to be.

An hour later Mr. Woodham was standing under the starlight in front of Holyrood House. That silence, which both himself and

Sir John felt to be more oppressive than the wildest uproar, had been broken by the entrance of Simonds with coffee. Never was interruption more welcome; never did man feel more relieved than Mr. Woodham when he heard Sir John ask his butler if the young ladies were in the drawing-room. The words spoken, if not quite in his usual tone, at least in a manner sufficiently easy and natural, seemed to clear the atmosphere like a gust of crisp frosty air sweeping through the closeness of a sick-chamber.

'No, Sir John,' answered Simonds; 'they went up-stairs immediately after dinner.'

Mr. Woodham took comfort out of this. He did not want to remain longer than he could possibly avoid. He desired to be out in the night alone for a time, till he recovered somewhat from the effect of the shock he had received.

He finished his coffee, and then, murmuring some remark about fearing to intrude if he stayed longer while Lady Moffat was unwell, took his leave. This time Sir John did not strive to detain him. There was a hopeless weary look in his face that struck to Mr. Woodham's heart; a listless feebleness with which he shook his guest's hand at the hall-door, whither he accompanied him, the clergyman could not drive from his memory.

When he left the gates he did not turn towards Kensington High-street; instead, he set his face northward; and at the top of Palace Gardens, taking the Notting Hill-road, made a detour round by the Uxbridge-road and the grounds of Holland House, till at length he found himself in the main thoroughfare to Hammersmith, and not far from Edwarde-square. But he did not,

even when close by, take the turning which led to his mother's house. He kept straight on—up the Kensington-road and Kensington High-street, till he came again to Palace Gardens, and the place he felt was now so full of mystery to his mind.

Strange as Sir John's manner and Sir John's words had seemed when he sat opposite to him, they appeared shrouded in a far deeper mystery when he considered both, hurrying along with no other companionship than his own thoughts. What was the mystery in Palace Gardens? Like most other persons, he had felt there must, to quote Mr. Lassils' frank expression, 'be a screw loose' somewhere in the Moffat household; but hitherto it never occurred to him there was aught worse amiss than my lady's awful temper—enough, in all conscience—and perhaps a streak of insanity on the side of Sir John's handsome wife, which might account charitably for her stormy moods and otherwise inexplicable eccentricities.

Now, however, it was impossible for him to doubt that, let what would be wrong, Sir John was 'in it,' not as a victim, but as an accomplice. There was no mistaking that fact. Mr. Woodham had not lived his life in vain; he had not walked through the world with his eyes shut. If his West-end experiences had shown him little more than the vanity and selfishness, and egotism and meanness, and want of charity of those born Fortune's favourites, his knowledge of the East gave an insight into human nature he might have sought for in vain amongst the squares and terraces of fashionable London. He had worked amongst the poorest of the poor and the lowest of the low. He had seen sorrow

and he had beheld sin ; he had spoken comforting words to women well-nigh heart-broken, and listened to the despairing utterances of remorse. So he knew, from the moment Sir John began his comments upon the character of David, there must be some attraction for him in the story his fellows did not wot of ; and when he put forward his supposititious friend he felt so certain it was of himself he spoke, he stopped the words ere they could pass his lips, dreading to hear, afraid with a great fear of learning what Sir John desired to tell.

Why did he desire to tell it ? As he walked along, with the silence of suburban London around, and the glittering stars shining above his head, Mr. Woodham asked himself that question till he grew tired and weary of conjecture.

Was it because, to adopt his own expression, he had kept silence for years ? The clergyman would not entertain that idea for a moment, neither could he imagine the reserve almost of a lifetime, reserve which certainly was an integral part of Sir John's character, breaking bounds save under the pressure of some new and terrible necessity.

He did not believe a person could so change his nature as in an instant to feel the need of a confidant, after having managed to exist so long without one.

The more he reflected, the more puzzled he grew. What could have happened to induce such a sudden collapse in the strength of such a nature ? Had any pressing occasion for action and decision arisen ? Was any crisis imminent, any collapse at hand ? If it were so, how could he justify his own refusal to hear the story, whatever it might be ? In a general

way, he knew he was right to advise reticence, to repress such confidences ; but in this particular case he felt doubtful. He might have mistaken the cry of his own heart, the desire of his own soul, the knowledge of the world he had acquired, for prudence and discretion. In his own eagerness to put far from him acquaintance with any terrible secret, he might have been stifling the anguished appeal of a torn and tortured conscience.

He would go back ; he would tell Sir John he had reconsidered his own words ; he would say he was willing to share any burden, to assist any laden sinner. And so in hot haste he walked up Palace Gardens, and passed through the gate, and strode along the drive, and looked up at Holyrood House, where lights were still shining, and stood before the door—ay, and held the knocker in his hand, and then—paused and hesitated.

Sir John might ere now have repented of his own utterances ; might be regretting even then the lengths to which he had gone ; might feel vexed at his pretext having been deemed so transparent. No ; Mr. Woodham could not again solicit a confidence he had refused, could not encroach upon a trouble, the evidences of which were so accidentally exposed before him.

'I will write in the morning,' he considered ; 'write and say that if any poor help of mine can serve the person referred to, if one who is not wealthy or influential, or aught save true and faithful, appear likely to prove of use, he may command me. I cannot, under any pretence, force myself upon him to-night ;' and he turned slowly away, and walked thoughtfully and sadly down Palace Gardens.

He believed his own sermon had some share in Sir John's distress; 'but not much,' he considered, with mournful modesty, 'not much.'

'Whatever the sin may have been, it is not that which is troubling him now; it is the consequences of the sin. When Nathan said to David, "Thou art the man," it was then the king felt fully, and confessed his guilt. What is the calamity which has come to this sinner, reflecting to his own conscience, as from a mirror, the face of his crime?'

With head bent and mind absorbed, he was passing the entrance to Kensington Palace, when a stranger, advancing swiftly from the opposite direction, almost ran against him.

On both sides apologies swift and courteous were made and received. Mr. Woodham continued on his road, and the unknown individual pursued his way.

'I wonder what it all means,' considered the clergyman, recalling for the hundredth time Sir John's words and Sir John's manner. Wanting a clue, how could he tell? How could he know that an advertisement which that morning appeared in the second column of the *Times* had been to the master of Holyrood House as the voice of Fate, as the coming event for which Mr. Woodham's sermon might have prepared him?

Even then, even while he sat listening, while the incense floated through the church, and scents and perfumes made the air faint and heavy to his unaccustomed senses, the message was on its way.

It came to Palace Gardens, to Holyrood House, to the master and mistress of the mansion so long uninhabited, wrapped up in print—an emissary of misfortune in the shape of an ordinary paper.

'FIFTY POUNDS REWARD,' thus ran the advertisement.—'Information wanted concerning the daughter of Thomas Palthorpe, who was born at Sunnysdown Farm, Ravelsmede, Hampshire. If living, she would now be of age. The above reward will be paid for any reliable intelligence as to her whereabouts by Messrs. Craton & Crawton, Solicitors, Lincoln's-inn-fields.'

As he read, the *Times* dropped from Sir John's nerveless fingers. The footfalls of Retribution seemed sounding in his ear. What did it mean? Who could be searching for Rachel? To whom besides himself did it seem likely the fact of her life or death might prove of the slightest significance?

Lady Moffat could have enlightened him on that point. Lady Moffat understood the horror she had so long dreaded. The possible misfortune—the *only* misfortune she really feared—which had disturbed her when Fate seemed most propitious, which had coloured the dreams of that magnificently prosperous later life, was at hand.

She did not know whether misfortune was really tracking her down, or whether its stroke might still be averted, but she comprehended what the advertisement meant. She was perfectly aware who had dictated it; and as she once paced beside a swiftly flowing river with the shades of night darkling all around, so she now walked backward and forward in the solitude of her own room, with the unknown future stretching gloomily before her, clouds gathering over the sky of her life, and all surrounding circumstances threatening a terrible storm.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FROM THE DEAD.

THE person encountered by Mr. Woodham in Palace Gardens walked with a firm free step past Holyrood House, and turned in at the gates of that less pretentious residence Mr. Lassils had entered, with his strangely-made acquaintance, on the night of Lady Moffat's ball.

He opened the door with a latchkey and went straight through the hall to the same small room to which, on the occasion referred to, he introduced his visitor. For, indeed, seen in the light diffused over the apartment by a shaded lamp, he proved to be the individual who had stood afar off, looking at the dancers, listening to the music. He seemed worn and worried; and his face bore a wearied expression, though it brightened at sight of an elderly lady, who sat in an armchair drawn near the fire, knitting.

'I did not expect to find you still up, aunt,' he said, taking a seat at a little distance from the hearth.

'I thought you might wish to speak to me,' she answered. 'I am not much help to you, I know; yet still—'

'You are all the help I have,' he interrupted. 'There is no one in whom I can confide save you. No person in the world may ever feel with me in this matter as you do.'

'That is true,' she said; 'for your sorrow is my shame. We cannot look for any news yet, I suppose.'

'I have news,' he answered, handing her a letter; 'did you ever see that writing before?'

The old lady put on her spectacles and peered curiously at the superscription; then she took an enclosure out of the envelope and

glanced at the few words traced upon it.

After that she lifted her eyes and gazed at her companion in amazement.

'Mira!' she exclaimed.

'Mira assuredly,' he answered.

'You see what she says: "*Mr. Palthorpe's child died years ago in America.*"'

'Died years ago,' repeated the old lady. 'Do you believe it?'

'Not for a moment,' he answered; 'but just look at that letter again attentively. Notice the quality of the paper, the thickness of the envelope, the delicate perfume hanging about it. Should you say there was any poverty where that note came from?'

'Not poverty, perhaps,' she answered hesitatingly.

'I do not think I ever told you what Doctor Dilton said,' went on her companion; 'in fact I know I did not, because I could not bear the idea of harbouring his suggestions; but something in that note seems, I do not know in the least why, to emphasise his words. "There is only one man in England," he said, "or in the world, who can tell you all about your wife and child, and that man is Mr. Hay. Find him, and you will hold the clue you want."'

'And shall you try to find him?'

'I have tried,' was the answer, 'not because I really attached importance to Doctor Dilton's suspicion, but because I wished to leave no stone unturned before advertising. There is no such person to be found in London. I have gone to every one bearing that name both in the City and in the Court Directory, and in the Suburban Directories, and I can neither come upon him or any trace of him.'

'He may be dead,' said the lady.

'He may. Thousands of people, millions of people have had time to die in twenty years.'

'And yet she is alive.'

'And yet she is alive.'

He repeated these words slowly and bitterly, stooping forward and looking down at the carpet as he spoke, his hands clasped loosely together, his whole attitude one of the deepest despondency, a world of misery in his tone.

'Yes, she is alive, evidently,' he said, as if he had not previously uttered almost those identical words; and he rose and took a hurried turn up and down the small apartment, coming at last close to the fireplace and leaning against the chimneypiece while he went on,

'I wonder why I want to know where she is, what she is doing? What can it profit me to learn anything about her? Why am I raking up the old shame and the old sorrow? Can you enlighten me? How is it that since I have returned to England this time every thought, every effort, seems directed to that one object?'

Do you recognise him now, dear reader, as he stands bending an earnest gaze upon his companion, as he lays one hand on the mantelshelf and stretches out the other with a gesture of weary appeal?

He is more than twenty years older; he has worked hard; he has lived by the sweat of his brow; he has been scorched by many suns; worn by the rigour of labour; there is gray sprinkled amongst the brown of his thick hair; a beard and moustache almost cover the lower part of his face; the frank blue eyes have an expression in them absent when he lay at death's door far east in London. Yet it is the same man, with the same loyal

tender heart beating in his bosom, who, in his younger days, went into the battle of life so bravely and with so rare a courage, and set about his poor home flowers fair and sweet, if humble—typical of the garlands of happiness and contentment with which his cheerful honest nature would have wreathed and beautified the lowly lot he had chosen, all for love.

Yes, the same: the man Sir John Moffat believed had gone down in the great ocean years and years previously; who all in the golden summer weather returned to Sunnydown Farm, to find his wife faithless, his child gone, hope dead, every bud and bloom and fruit of existence lying scattered in the dust.

The same, back in England once more; a rich man now, by what seemed the merest accident lodged in Palace Gardens, so near wife and child and quondam friend, three minutes' walk would have sufficed to take him inside the doors of Holyrood House; and yet so far off in the tangled wilderness of London life he might, for all he knew or guessed of their whereabouts, have been still at the other side of the world.

'I never wish to see her more,' he said, finding his companion did not answer; 'and yet I feel as if I should know no peace of mind or rest of body till I discover where she is, and what she is doing. How is this? can you explain it?'

'You must desire to find your child,' Miss Aggles—for it was indeed she—said evasively.

'Why,' he persisted, 'if she be not dead she has most probably grown up like her mother.'

'No,' interrupted Miss Aggles vehemently, 'never! She could not so change; the little one was the sweetest, tenderest, softest—'

She stopped suddenly, and he

remained silent, lost in thought, wandering amid a maze of conjecture.

'I was happier in the Bush,' he said at last. 'I wish we had never returned to England.'

'It is right you should try to trace Rachel,' she replied; 'and in justice to yourself you ought also to find out what Mira is doing.'

'Why?' he asked.

'Because—' she paused for an instant, and then went on firmly, 'you are not yet an old man; you may want to form fresh ties for yourself. Why should you not?'

'Do you mean marry again?' he inquired.

'Well, yes, that is what I do mean.'

He shook his head sorrowfully.

'I have no heart,' he answered.

'I think it broke that February day when I found the wife for whose sake I had sacrificed so much would give up nothing for me—meant, weak and sick as I still was, to let me go alone across the sea.'

Miss Aggles did not speak, she only looked at him with a sympathy truer than any words could have been.

'The pain of it hurts me still at times,' he went on, with a little hurry in his voice. 'I am sure I cannot tell why, for I knew what she was before that day. I look back, do you know, and think of it all as if I were quite another person, pitying the young husband just creeping out of the valley of the shadow. Foolish, ridiculous, is it not? But O, how I loved her once! how happy I thought I could be with her even in the humblest home!'

'And she cared for nothing but herself,' said Miss Aggles; 'not for the old man who was proud of her; not for me, who tended her in every illness she

ever knew; not for servant or animal about the farm; not for you, who gave up all your prospects for her; not for the child she bore. Very sure am I, whenever she is or whatever she is doing, she has no thought or care or trouble but for herself.'

He did not make any reply. Even though she had stripped every green leaf, and left the branch of his existence destitute of even one bud of promise, he could not speak against the woman who had once lain in his bosom and dwelt in his heart. When he began to think of the wretchedness of the end, the brightness of the beginning came before him with its glistening sunbeams, its wealth of beauty, its dreams of hope, its glamour of youth and romance and love!

'Has Millicent been out to-day?' he asked after a pause, evidently desirous of changing the subject.

'No,' answered Miss Aggles dryly. 'Her father has not been well; she said she did not wish to go out.'

'Laesils called?' he inquired.

'Yes, he came this evening, and stayed for a cup of coffee.'

'How do matters proceed?'

'They do not proceed at all,' said Miss Aggles.

'On which side do they halt?'

'Not on his, you may be sure,' answered Miss Aggles. 'He is willing enough, anxious enough too, for the affair to be settled.'

'I wish it was settled; then we might leave England, or at all events London.'

'Take my advice,' said Miss Aggles, as she folded up her knitting and stuck her needles carefully in the work, 'and do not leave London till you have exhausted every possible means to find your wife.'

'I have no intention of relin-

quishing the quest now,' he answered. 'The plunge has been made, and I must swim on to the end. It will be through strange waters, though, I am afraid,' he added, as he opened the door for Miss Aggles to pass out.

All that night long he lay awake; it was quite morning before he fell into a troubled sleep, and when he got up and went down to breakfast he felt, as he himself said, more tired than he had ever done after a hard day's work on the sheep-run.

'I am sure I often wish I was back there,' he remarked, sipping his tea reflectively.

The words might not be much, but they were uttered in a tone of such conviction that a very pretty young lady who made the third at table raised her eyes and looked at him inquiringly.

Then, though he never glanced back at her, and there seemed nothing whatever to have caused the emotion, she coloured painfully, and fell into a train of apparently unpleasant thought.

'I do not think you would care much for the sheep-run now,' commented Miss Aggles; 'it might be all very well while you were making money, but—'

'The pleasure was in making the money,' he answered; 'when once it is made there is nothing more, it seems to me, to do or to live for.'

'You ought to be poor again, and then you would value your present advantages,' said the elder woman rebukingly.

'I wish I were poor, but not for the reason you suggest,' he replied. 'What is your opinion, Milly?' he added, addressing his opposite neighbour. 'Do you, in the middle of all this civilisation, ever regret the pleasant days we passed in Australia, that can come back no more?'

'O, that they could!' murmured the lady. 'We were so happy then; so much happier than we can ever be again. I wish we had never come to London.'

'Not even for the sake of the eighty thousand?' he asked playfully.

'Not for eighty times eighty thousand. With all my heart I wish my godfather had never made a will, or that his next-of-kin was in peaceable possession of the money.'

'In the latter case, what would Mr. Lassils do?' he asked.

'I have not the slightest idea.'

'What would you both, then, do when you are married, to amend my question?' he persisted.

'I shall never marry Mr. Lassils,' she answered.

Mr. Palthorpe looked towards Miss Aggles in amazement, but she shook her head as if warning him to maintain silence.

'Poor Mr. Lassils,' he said gravely, and proceeded to finish his breakfast, thinking of his first acquaintance with that gentleman, and speculating whether the very pretty little girl, of whom he had on the night of the great party in Palace Gardens spoken with such enthusiasm, could have half so tender and sweet and attractive a face as that possessed by Millicent. 'And I should not be surprised if she refuse to marry him after all,' he considered. 'Yet it would be a pity, for I do not think Lassils is a bad sort of fellow; and really eighty thousand pounds is a nice trifle towards housekeeping.'

As he proceeded that day upon the search which had engaged him almost constantly since his return to England, he thought much and mournfully of the circumstances which induced General Graham to leave Australia.

'Till the news of that legacy

came we never thought of coming to this weary old country. We were happy out there;' and his mind went back to his first acquaintance with the General and his daughter, and the pleasant friendship which had existed amongst them since.

Walking up Chancery-lane in the afternoon on his way to Lincoln's-inn-fields, he was accosted by a gentleman, who hurried along the narrow pavement after him.

'So here you are!' cried a cheery voice in his ear. 'I meant to have looked you up this evening in Palace Gardens.'

'Why, doctor, who would have thought of seeing you in London?' answered the other; and then the pair shook hands cordially, and Doctor Dilton explained he had been called all of a sudden to town to take charge of his cousin's practice. 'I shall be near you,' he added, 'in Kensington. I am going there now. There was a little business I wanted to see a lawyer about, and so I made my way first into Serjeants' Inn. Well, and how are you?'

Mr. Palthorpe said he was well.

'Ay, you are a different-looking fellow from what you were when I first saw you,' said the doctor. 'I did not think your chances were good then of making old bones. Lord! to think that is more than twenty years ago, and it seems like yesterday!'

'Come, and let us have some dinner together,' suggested Mr. Palthorpe; and nothing loth the doctor accompanied him to a quiet tavern off Fleet-street, where many a celebrity in bygone times ate his prime steak and drank his port brought to him in a bottle bearing some familiar seal.

'Now we are quiet and all to ourselves,' began the doctor at last, 'I want to ask you a question.

Have you heard anything of the lady who was your wife?'

'Enough to convince me she is alive,' was the answer; and Mr. Palthorpe went on to tell what he had done, and why he at length felt constrained to insert the advertisement which produced so profound an impression in Holyrood House.

When he had quite finished, Doctor Dilton shook his head.

'I think it was a false move,' he said. 'You ought not to have let her know you are alive and in England.'

'Why not?'

'Because it will induce her to keep out of your way. You remember the advice I gave you when we talked this matter over before in Wales?'

'Yes; to look up Mr. Hay.'

'Have you looked up Mr. Hay?'

'I cannot discover any trace of him, either in the present or the past.'

'Humph!' said the doctor. 'Tell me exactly how you proceeded.'

Mr. Palthorpe told him.

'Bah!' exclaimed the other. 'You have gone about the whole thing in a half-hearted will-and-I-won't sort of way. My belief is you do not want to succeed in your search.'

'I should like, at any rate, to know what has become of the child. As for the rest, after twenty years, what can it signify?'

'A man may as well be cured of a malady that has been afflicting him for twenty years as go on suffering for another twenty,' answered Doctor Dilton.

'Ay, but mine is incurable,' said Mr. Palthorpe.

'I am not so sure of that,' was the reply. 'At all events, it is clearly your duty now you are in position to push such inquiries, to ascertain whether your daughter

stands in need of help or not. Just let us run over the facts of the case again. You only told them to me hurriedly down in Wales.'

'You understand, I suppose, I am not under any delusion. There could not have been a mistake on my part,' said Mr. Palthorpe.

'Well,' said the doctor dryly, 'I do not imagine you are so infatuated. Such facts can scarcely be explained away; but now repeat the story to me. First, all of a sudden, Mrs. Palthorpe refused to accompany you to Australia.'

'Yes, at the very last minute.'

'And you supposed she went to her relations at Sunnydown Farm?'

'Yes, I left her with them, and it was arranged she should remain at the farm.'

'And in point of fact she never did so remain?'

'O yes, she did, for some months after Rachel was born; then all in a minute she said she must go to London. She went to London; and when she came back, stated she had obtained a situation in a milliner's establishment.'

'I see; and ostensibly she entered upon that situation. She might really too,' added the doctor musingly.

'She might, but I do not consider it likely, first or last. She never mentioned the name of the house where she was employed to her aunt.'

'I don't consider that proves much,' said Doctor Dilton judicially. 'Did she live in the house?'

'Impossible to say. She did not live at the address to which her letters were directed.'

'How do you know that?'

'A neighbour called to see her there, and could not find her.'

'And all this time you were

writing to her at her grandfather's?'

'Of course; I had not the slightest idea she was absent.'

'She wrote in reply as if at Ravelsmede?'

'Yes, and I think really was at the farm. She used to pay periodical visits to her relations—sometimes staying only a few hours.'

'Then we come to the time when the news of the loss of the North Wales reached England. What did she do then?'

'I do not know whether she wrote down at once or not; but at any rate she went to the farm shortly afterwards, and was very much vexed because her grandfather said she had lost her looks.'

'And had she? asked the doctor.

'Her aunt said not; but that she seemed restless and unsettled in her mind; strange altogether—in her ways and talk and manner.'

'Then what happened?'

'Why, she went away again; and after a very short time returned and said she was going to be married and wanted Rachel. Neither aunt nor grandfather would part with the child; and it was agreed she should go back to London and show her intended husband a letter Miss Aggles wrote refusing to let Rachel leave the farm.'

'I remember your telling me that. Go on.'

Mr. Palthorpe had paused for a moment, but now proceeded.

'On the morning of the day she was to have gone to town, she went out early and met the postman, who gave her the few lines I had written to Miss Aggles asking her to break the fact of my being alive to my wife—'

He stopped again, and Doctor Dilton this time made no comment.

'When her aunt came into the kitchen,' with an effort the deserted husband continued, 'she saw Mira burning something in the fire—it was in the summertime, you understand—and looking white and worn and fit to drop. She went up-stairs—he had to stop between the sentences containing so bitter a revelation—and when Miss Aggles followed, she found her in a swoon. I know it was then she discovered—'

Doctor Dilton held up his hand; he comprehended that part of the story; he had gathered up that ravel of shame and disgrace and misery long before.

'And that same day,' he remarked, 'after saying she would remain over the night, she stole away, as I have heard, taking the child with her. From that time to this you have never heard tale nor tidings of her?'

'Save the letter bearing a foreign postmark, saying the child was well, and those two lines in answer to the advertisement, stating the child died long ago.'

'Ah!' commented the doctor; 'ah!'

'I returned to England ill, penniless. My place in Australia would, I know, be filled up immediately the tidings of my supposed death reached my employers. What with the horror of the shipwreck; the awful privations I endured before that outward-bound vessel rescued me; the mental agony I endured, fancying—well,' he went on firmly, 'fancying how much *she* would suffer; for, doctor, her letters were affectionate. What did you say?'

'Never mind what I said,' answered Doctor Dilton. 'I said the same thing to myself many a time when you were laid up due East. Ha! if ever man made a bad bargain, it was you. But you were telling me—'

'What I meant to tell was, that I had a long bad illness after my return; that I lay at Sunnydown Farm for long between life and death; that I was nursed as tenderly as mother ever nursed a child; that, during the winter following, the old man sank and died; that Miss Aggles agreed to follow my fortunes, and, scraping together what money she could, started with me for America. For years and years ill-luck pursued me. I tried place after place, scheme after scheme, till at length we found ourselves in Australia. There I had the great good fortune to save General Graham's life, and from that hour everything prospered with me. I was able to help him: he helped me. His health was so bad that, without the assistance of one younger and more vigorous than himself, he must have succumbed. His position was so good that he was competent to push me forward; and, as I told you, I am now really a rich man. Money always comes too late.'

'Tut, tut, tut,' said Doctor Dilton, using the friendly exclamation he found of so much use amongst his farmer patients, 'nothing in this world is ever too late, except a tardy guest at dinner. Cheer up; and now let us be going; there is not another drop of wine in the bottle, and we must not have a second.'

A PICCADILLY POET.

I HAVE left the stuffy city ; for its swells were leaving town,
And the Park has got so dusty, that 'twill soon be turning brown :
I had pretty well seen everything the season had to show ;
To have lingered on much longer would have been considered 'slow.'

My top-hat and my patents, my toothpick and my crutch,
I left them all behind me—well, I don't require them much ;
And I find it very pleasant on my back beneath the trees,
With a mild havannah scenting the already scented breeze.

Now my boots have ceased to pinch me, and my close-cropped hair
may grow,
While my tired eyes no longer the midnight's revels show ;
And still though far from fashion's strings some sirens may be seen,
For even here I flirt a bit with Lila and Lurline.

It is indeed delightful to exchange the noisy street
For the peaceful shady pleasures of a rural cool retreat ;
Yet, while I own it's charming, I admit with half a smile
That its chief delight exists in being only for a while.

Though I love these shady alleys, and these nights so calm and stilly,
They cannot hold a candle to the charms of Piccadilly ;
To be lulled to sleep by nightingale, and roused by early lark,
Is sweet, but O, far sweeter still my strollings in the Park.

This life would get monotonous, for what is to be seen ?
I'd soon get bored by Lila and impatient of Lurline.
I came down here, you see, because it's just the thing
To rest one's flagging powers and prepare one for a 'fling.'

O, the opera, the theatre, my diggings in Pall Mall,
My club just round the corner, and—the girls who dance so well !
They square their dimpled elbows ; they do not dance—they float ;
While love and mirth play hide-and-seek around each swanlike throat.

Yes, the country is quite pleasant—but not for very long ;
Let me see and hear a sweet girl, not the song-bird and his song :
The country is delightful—for those who find it such ;
But give me Piccadilly with my toothpick and my crutch.

THE VIOLIN-PLAYER.

By BERTHA THOMAS, AUTHOR OF 'PROUD MAISIE.'

CHAPTER XXX.

THE VICTOR VANQUISHED.

Mrs. DAMIAN woke one Saturday morning with her mind in a ferment. There was reason for it. Ere set of sun, Gervase, now on his way from the Continent, might possibly arrive. She was consumed with impatience to see some first-fruits of her machinations, and was already pondering what her next step had better be. To undermine this girl's fatal influence over her son was all she lived for at present, and to that end all means were holy. The grand thing was to gain time; to sow, no matter how, the seeds of discord and distrust. So much, she thanked Heaven, she might reasonably hope soon to see accomplished.

The post brought her a copy of that day's *Firefly*. She fell upon it with avidity, then stopped short. Who had sent this? It was addressed in an unknown hand. She opened it in haste, and was met at once by the expected large-print memoir, carefully marked out by the sender.

She read it through, with an odd blank look, like one who has broken his teeth on a nut, and finds it—hollow.

The leading facts of Laurence's public life were simply and accurately stated, without a word of impertinent comment, or the shadow of disparagement anywhere. Gracious powers! If her son's *fiancée* had been a princess from the most rigidly exclusive

of German courts, this 'introduction' could not have been more deferential in its tone and language. No cheap flattery even; not a line at which fastidiousness itself could take exception.

Mrs. Damian tossed the paper aside in a pet; then put on her spectacles to look at it again. Why was that paragraph underlined?

'Strangest of all, perhaps, is it that she should have so few calumniators and detractors. But it must be a venomous nature, indeed, from whom her peculiar individuality would fail to draw the sting. So far, her only enemies have been such as knew nothing about her, either as a violin-player or as Laurence Therval.'

A distinct apprehension seized her. Now, first among her unread letters, she spied an envelope addressed in the same unfamiliar hand. She tore it open:

'Madam,—The unworthy writer of these few lines of introduction, offered to a charming young artiste, makes no apology for forwarding them to you, as to one not uninterested in her reception in this country. He has reason to think certain facts have reached your ears, which have been travestied into fictions. It will, I know, give you the sincerest pleasure to hear that they have deceived no one. The particulars of the affair I allude to reflect honour on Mdlle. Therval, and no dishonour on Baron Miramar, who

was a suitor for her hand, and sued in vain. It is rumoured that another has been more fortunate. I mention this as it has helped to trace the mischief to its source.

'Informants who wish to remain *incognito* should take better precautions. The statement, as it reached me, is now in the possession of Mdlle. Therval, together with the name of the mischief-maker.

'If you desire that this matter should go no further than ourselves, let me suggest your calling on Mdlle. Therval, at — Park-street. She is generosity itself, and an appeal to her kindness might not be in vain.—Faithfully yours,

'CHARLES SPARKLETON.'

Mrs. Damian was aghast. This man, she had forgotten she ever knew him. Hers was a slippery memory for some people; but she had taken care to engrave herself in his by some social slight he had never forgotten. She was apt to offend people in this way, and in this case the victim was not of a forgiving disposition. Seldom in his life had he been happier than when writing that letter; but the effect far exceeded his hopes of revenge. She was stunned by his audacious impertinence, exasperated by her defeat, then sickened by a fear that swallowed up all other sensations. The weapon she had made use of—careful not to ask first if it were a lawful one—had broken in her hand; but that was not what troubled her. Her conscience was old and tough; and to gain her point in this instance, she would have gone by any crooked ways that promised to lead to her goal.

The matter was that she had failed, and that her hand had

been recognised in the affair. Even Sparkleton was far from realising what an awful nightmare he had conjured up by his last sentence.

Gervase and Laurence were in communication no doubt. He might arrive in England any moment, and possibly rush to her first. All might come out, and—the miserable woman turned giddy as she saw the portion she had fairly and inevitably earned. Hate, disgust, contempt, and entire alienation from the single human being whose affection was of worth to her. The thought drove her frantic, and would not leave her for a moment. Amy came fluttering into her mother's room. The papers and letters were thrust hastily out of sight, but not so Mrs. Damian's distraction. She pleaded a headache, anything to account for her inability to attend as usual to the business of her daughter's *trousseau*, which was detaining them in town. The afternoon came, and she sent Amy out driving with Diana. Solitude was a relief, but only at first. She tossed about on the sofa, then paced the room feverishly, questioning herself. What could she do? Dared she wait—leave it to chance? Towards four o'clock came a telegram from Calais that decided the matter:

'Expect me this evening.—
GERVASE DAMIAN.'

A kind of panic seized her and spurred her to action. Sooner humiliate herself to Laurence, who knew all, than to Gervase, who was, and might yet be, kept in the dark.

Laurence had a concert that night, and was resting alone in the sitting-room, when a brougham, with the blinds down, drew up at the door. Mrs. Damian requested to be shown in, affirming boldly

that Mdle. Therval expected her. The chances were that Laurence, if she had the choice, would decline the encounter. A figure seated by the window rose quickly at the startling announcement of the visitor's name.

Mrs. Damian had not thought the girl was so tall and proud and dignified-looking. During her drive the wildest hopes and conjectures had visited her brain. Gervase might have been accepted from mercenary or socially ambitious motives. All foreigners suppose Englishmen to be made of money. Gervase was not so rich as that. Perhaps Mdle. Therval took him for a millionaire. His mother was ready to make him out a bad match, to prove that his position in society was not so very high.

But face to face with Laurence in person, she felt the straws she was clutching at were of the weakest. To be abashed in the presence of one so young was of course out of the question. But she was very uncomfortable.

'You are astonished to see me,' she began guardedly, anxious not to betray herself unnecessarily, but to sound the girl a little first. She had still a furtive hope that Sparkleton *might* have been amusing himself at her expense. 'I think I knew you in Rome; still I am probably the last person from whom you expected a visit.'

'I am indeed at a loss,' said Laurence definitely, 'to think what motive can bring you here to-day.'

'I know all,' said Mrs. Damian querulously, seating herself as she spoke. Laurence's evident wish to cut short their interview she was prepared for, and prepared obstinately to resist. 'All the clandestine communications you have been carrying on with my

son, the ruinous engagement into which he has been drawn.'

'Has he told you?' she asked proudly.

'He has not dared. He knows it would break my heart.'

'Your heart?' repeated the girl, with scathing emphasis.

Mrs. Damian winced. Blushing time was long past with her. Laurence was standing, still. Her attitude, her countenance, puzzled and half-intimidated her visitor, who modulated into a minor key of lamentation.

'He is my only son. All my hopes are centred in him. He has always been our stay; and with his talents and advantages, he must, in due time, have risen to an eminent position. But he is impetuous, and it will be his ruin. The marriage into which he would let himself be—something checked her, and involuntarily she corrected herself—'into which he would rush blindly, brings the downfall of all our hopes for him, and for his promotion and distinction.'

'It is his choice,' said Laurence.

'In a mad moment,' returned Mrs. Damian. 'A false step he would rue for the remainder of his life. Let us reason a little. I urge it in your interest as well as his. No good can come to you from marrying out of your station; and it would be absolutely fatal to my son's advancement in life. Are you bent upon harming him?'

'You, to talk to me of this?' exclaimed Laurence, half beside herself with astonishment and indignation. Mrs. Damian's eyes were running away from hers all over the room to avoid their scrutiny. 'What have I done to you, that you should go out of your way to try and injure me as you have done?'

'I am not aware,' she stammered helplessly, 'how I—'

'O, pardon me,' said Laurence, 'I know what I am saying.'

'It is useless to ask you to listen to me, then?' Mrs. Damian said at length, coldly. 'You are thinking—very naturally—of yourself. From beginning to end I have had but one thought in the matter: my son's welfare.'

She spoke it as in self-acquittal. Like those who burnt heretics, and did it to the glory of God.

There was another long silence; then Laurence said,

'I have learnt something from this. You are right in thinking I did not know what I was doing at first. If this is what it means, if this is what his friends—what you—will stoop to, to prevent it, there is more to separate us than I could dream of. Do you think I wish to harm your son? He should know. You will not let him be judge. But I shall give him back his word and this letter; and it will make him feel, as I feel, that there can be no more between us.'

She spoke under the stress of the strongest painful excitement. Mrs. Damian only saw one thing—that she held in her hand the tell-tale paper.

'My writing!' she gasped.

'Yours.'

Mrs. Damian half shrieked,

'Do not do that! Ask anything of me! I will consent to it—to everything—sooner than that he should have any knowledge of this.'

Laurence was silent with astonishment. Mrs. Damian mistook it for obduracy, and all other considerations sank into nothing under the pressure of what menaced her now.

'I will do anything you wish. I will consent to your marriage—all, if only you will give me back

that letter. If he knew, he would hate me; and that—that would be worse to me than anything that could possibly befall.'

'Ah!'

'I acted foolishly and blindly, on the impulse of the moment,' Mrs. Damian urged hurriedly; 'but I did not originate what I tried to spread. How should I know it was false? Had it been true, as I imagined, I should have been justified in moving heaven and earth to stop my son's marriage.'

'Are you now convinced?'

'Do I not prove it?' she cried nervously, 'when I tell you I will give up everything—give up my son to you—without a single word, if you will promise—'

'Well?'

'Never to tell him, never let him dream of what has passed. It would kill me; for it would destroy his love for me. It is very little; but it is all I have in the world. Do not rob me of that—you, who have it all.'

Her despairing accent touched Laurence deeply. There was pity in her look now. The other caught at it instantly as a sign of relenting.

'Will you know more?' Mrs. Damian continued eagerly. 'I will show you the letter I received, and that has led to the misrepresentations you allude to. The writer, whom you may know, is to blame for all, not I. Remember I was deceived by it myself, before you try and fasten everything upon me.'

She produced Linda's rambling epistle. Laurence read it through, startled and wondering. Suddenly she turned very pale, and grasped the back of a chair; the room swam. The shaft had been traced home.

'Do you know who wrote it?' Mrs. Damian asked curiously.

'Perfectly.'

'Can you account for her malice?'

'Yes.'

Her tone petrified her listener. There was a long pause. Mrs. Damian felt posed and a little awed. The expression of the girl's face had undergone an entire change. There was no shrinking, no resentment; but no exultation either, no joy in her conquest just achieved. Laurence broke the silence first.

'You said you wanted your letter back,' she said, with forced calmness; 'here it is.'

Mrs. Damian's eye glistened suddenly. Laurence was holding out the paper, and motioning her to take it. She obeyed mechanically, scarcely daring to believe her senses. Then she broke out into some incoherent acknowledgments and protestations. Laurence cut her short.

'I want no promise from you, no return. Say to your son what you please,—of him, of me. I give him back his word that he gave me. You were right. There can be nothing between us.'

Mrs. Damian never knew how she got out into the street, and into her carriage. She was dazed with excitement, and the intense relief of having possessed herself of her letter drowned every other sense. She kept staring at it idiotically, grasping it tightly, till her brain cleared, and her agitation began to abate. Her mind and imagination were surprisingly agile. Out of danger, she saw the affair dwindling and fading already, and her foremost reflection was, 'Pity the girl was not born in the upper ten. She has the looks of a duchess, and the dignity too.'

She reached home, burnt the paper, and prepared to receive her son.

Gervase was crossing a blue calm sea, with a cloudless sky overhead, and favourable breezes blowing. Fair weather in his mind too. He beheld his life-prospect, and saw that it was good. Novelty has a potent charm for men of a 'certain age,' but it was no mere craving for change that had guided his choice. Rather the unalterable conviction of one who, having tried and found wanting many of the good things of this world, arrives at last at the best. Ambition had been the key-note of his life; but ambition of peculiar happiness rather than of peculiar distinction, which, perhaps, did not lie within his grasp. He could gauge his abilities; they were not despicable; nor were they of the sort to place him in the front rank. A courtier, it is said, must be *sans honneur et sans humeur*. Honour apart, he had a will and a way of his own that were not invariably those of his superiors. Gervase had always been liable to turn aside to look at a pretty face. And when you come to the second rank, in certain careers, it becomes a question whether it is worth the sacrifice of your inclinations.

To Gervase it was now no question at all. He laughed to think how propitious the gods had been to him as usual. No human being could now interfere with his enjoyment of existence. A new future opened before him. A home,—a thing he had never had in his life,—and liberty to fix it where he would. Rome, with its associations and liberal-minded, cultured circles, was, perhaps, the spot on earth where they would live happiest. All this while he was pretending to read a *Galigiani* he held in his hand. Suddenly a paragraph caught his eye, and with it his attention:

'Carlo Capponi, a notorious

vagabond, died recently at Olivano, near Rome. In making his last confession to the priest he declared himself to have been the perpetrator of a highway robbery on an English *attaché* at Rome last year, a daring outrage that created no little excitement in the capital at the time. A determined Socialist agitator, Bruno Pagano, was charged with the crime and convicted. Capponi now confesses himself the real culprit, and an inquiry instituted leaves no doubt of the fact. Bruno Pagano contrived to effect his escape shortly after his conviction—it was suspected by the connivance of the warders—and all search since made for him having been in vain, he is supposed to have left the country. His formal acquittal has been pronounced by the courts.

The packet was steaming into Dover harbour; Gervase had barely time to read the paragraph through. He thrust the paper into his pocket, wondering if there were truth in the report. He preferred to see there a cock-and-bull story only. At all events, other more important matters claimed his attention at present.

Mr. Gervase Damian it would seem, was in his way counted no less of an acquisition to the London season than Mdlle. Therval, to judge from the budget he found awaiting him on his arrival: the scented notes, in neat feminine hands, the pressing invitations, half a dozen for that very evening. He elected, however, to dine quietly with his mother and sister at their hotel, then to look in at one or two evening parties. It would serve to beguile the time till he went to Park-street. Laurence, as he knew, had a concert; but he had written word he should come to see her, if only for a few minutes, when she returned.

He had a pleasant hour or two at the houses he favoured with his appearance; met a lot of old friends. Society, without delighting him—he was not young enough for that—exhilarated and agreed with him. Every one likes doing what he does well, and Gervase deserved to be treated, as he everywhere was, as a social treasure.

Still it was with a sense of relief that he emerged into the fresh air. Eleven o'clock on a warm night in early June is a time when artificial light, artificial flowers, even artificial mirth, are apt to fail and pall. The instant he was out of it he pronounced it a bore—or, at the best, boy's-play—of which he had had his fill. No matter; it would serve to enhance the delicate pleasure of meeting her whose image seldom left him now.

Mdlle. Therval had not come in yet. Cherubina and Domenico were in the parlour; Gervase's entrance put them incontinently to flight. Almost at the same instant, the others drove up to the door. Madame Araciél followed the children up-stairs, and Laurence went into the sitting-room alone.

She entered quickly, gave him her hands for a moment in silence, then half-turned her head away. The lamplight fell on her profile. Her countenance reflected none of the joy on his; it was full of grave, sad determination.

'Renza, Renza,' he said, with a sort of fond reproach, ill-content with his reception. 'What is this? Are you not glad to see me, child?'

'I am, I am!' she said eagerly. 'You must forgive me. I have just come from playing. I am tired and confused. There, sit down.'

The excitement of performing

was still upon her. She was fresh from an arduous task indeed. To compete with the recollection of the established favourite Araciel, fresh in every one's memory. Well, she had held her own, and proved her right to a place by his side. But, though artists may despise the English as musical judges, they will mostly admit their first appearances in London not to have been among the least trying moments of their trying career.

Gervase came and sat near her, noting with delight the wondrous change in her appearance. The fragility that had alarmed him at Bleiburg was no longer so startling; the old nervous energy was returning apace. Happiness is the real sorcerer, the philtre that can magically restore drooping health. Bloom comes back in a day, in a night, quick as the burst of a southern spring. But her manner was strange; she kept her eyes from his, looking down silently at a flower she had taken from a glass.

'You are looking your old self to-night,' he said,—'brighter than at Bleiburg. Old England suits you.'

Laurence shrank slightly, and dropped the flower she held.

'Or no, I am sure you cannot breathe here,' he continued; 'one needs to be a native to find a London crowd or a London fog tolerable. You are a child of the sun. As for myself, I came into the world at Athens, you know, and have been spoilt for London life.'

He had picked up the flower she had let fall, with a playful movement of it to his lips. 'I vowed I would see you to-night,' he said—'that the sun should not rise in England, and we not have met. I have so much to say. Listen, Renza: in a few

days I must go down to the country, for my sister's marriage. After that, I am yours—and mine,' he added laughingly. 'My country has graciously consented to dispense with my future services; that is all happily settled. We are free as birds, you see. Was I wrong when I thought, for the present, till we see our way farther, we should live happiest in Rome?'

She raised her eyes mutely. They could speak for her sometimes, but they were dumb to-night.

'Still silent?' he said. 'Renza mia, why this distant, cold, moonlight look?'

Then he forgot himself, talked again of his plans, dwelt on his eagerness to begin life with her in their new home. The child's hands were clasped over her face, but the passionate tears were stealing through her fingers.

'Gervase!'

Her accent recalled him to his senses, and penetrated him with doubt and some dread.

'We were mad when we said there were only shadows that parted us—shadows we had driven away. I thought the world could not touch us because we forgot it.'

'What can you mean, Renza?' he asked reproachfully.

The girl rose to her feet.

'Does it sound to you like wild talk?' she said agitatedly. 'Well, it was my fault—my wrong—to forget what once I saw so plainly—'

'You remembered you were my love, and I yours. The rest I give you leave to forget,' he said playfully. 'It is immaterial.'

Laurence was struggling with a double weakness: the feminine tenderness, the feminine bitterness rising within her, that must be thrust aside if she is to be

just to herself and to him. She managed to speak composedly,

'When you came to me at Bleiburg, I was ill and sad. I thought I should die, or that if not, what lived would not be Laurence—that the Laurence you knew could only remain what she was by your love. O, it is dear to me, believe that. But I am not free. Something claims me—my people, my life, my work; I must not give them up.'

'But I ask you to give up nothing,' he exclaimed.

'Ah, you don't know,' she interposed vehemently. 'Do you suppose when I am with you I can think of myself, and what happens to me, or that I shall care first whether I play well or ill? To-night, after the concert, several ladies came to speak to me: they envied me, they said—they often say so. And every time that happens I say to myself what they do not know, "For this I have given up being happy as you and other women are,"'

'No, no,' he persisted; 'you will be happy as they, only with a higher happiness. You will love better for your greater heart.'

'O that I could think so!' she murmured. 'But there is more than this. Since I came here I have learnt so much. I have felt the distance between us, between your friends and mine, your life and mine, and that it is impassable, Gervase.'

'You can say it quietly and coolly,' he exclaimed, stupefied. 'And in all this not a single thought for me. Is that what you call love, Renza?'

'You will be happy yet,' she said.

'Never again without you. Renza, what has bewitched you, that you can say these things and think I shall listen patiently?'

'Our hope was a mad hope,' she persisted steadily. 'I abandon my vocation in following you. You break with those nearest you in joining fortunes with me. I have no right to turn back from mine, or take you from yours.'

Gervase was bewildered and uneasy. He seemed to feel the fair future he had set his heart upon slipping through his fingers. O, not yet, if moving heaven and earth could do it.

'And you will forget me soon,' she let fall sadly. 'Perhaps even it will be easy for you.'

'Renza, this is cruel,' he said. 'Will you talk of faithlessness to one who would make any earthly sacrifice for your sake?—you, who can consider and question, then coldly turn back, and tell me your love was a morning cloud.'

'Never!' she said firmly. 'I have one love, as I have one soul. But then—I am a woman.'

Gervase was silent, deeply troubled and perplexed. She was in earnest. A rock had suddenly risen between them; how, he did not stop to inquire—bent only on removing it.

'At least, Laurence, you will hear me speak,' he said.

She silently assented, and listened with downcast eyes and lips compressed, as he spoke, or his good angel spoke through him.

'I deserve no love nor sacrifice from you. See me as the world sees me, and you do right to cast me off. I have frittered my life away when I have not done worse. Perhaps no one has been the better or the happier in the end for knowing me. But I was not meant to be so selfish and thoughtless as I have been. One cannot help some things; and I have been the plaything of a world I despised.'

'I had almost left off believing in good things and beautiful things

when I met you. You gave me back my youth and my faith. You only can give me the happiness that I want to redeem me. With your hand to hold, I feel as if there was nothing I could not accomplish, no trial I could not bear. That is the feeling to meet the world with, love of mine. It cannot hurt you then by its sneers, or corrupt you with its smiles. Then, whether known or unknown, with your friends or with mine, in Italy or England, ours would be the best lot.

‘But if you desert me, Renza—if it was all a mockery—see what you do. You thrust me back into the dark; you destroy my faith in your affection; you snatch away the talisman that I need.’

‘I shall not be selfish any more, with you. I should like to make your life perfect. Is it so perfect now? Are you so sufficient to yourself that you can embrace solitude and be content? If you shut out love from your life, will you even be the better musician? Never believe it!’

She had turned away. Sweeter sophistry was never spoken.

‘It was for this, then, you let me hope and trust?’ he said imploringly—‘just to deny everything at the last.’

Her silence wounded him deeply. Her resistance, whatever lay at the root of it, made him bitter. He had spoken so frankly and earnestly—tried, and failed. He rose. She faced him now—her lips were parted, her look was strange and blank—but he saw no sign of relenting. Ah, how proud she was, how ambitious! She could trample out love—for fame’s sake. In his excitement he spoke harshly, hardly knowing what he said.

‘Don’t fear I shall importune you now you have made your mind known. Be happy, if

honours can make you so. Perhaps one day you will feel what I learnt long since—that an immortality of fame is not worth an hour of love; and that will be denied you, as it is denied me.’

Still Laurence stood like a statue, her eyes fixed and tearless. Gervase came and took her hand.

‘Do you remember a day at the Piazza San Matteo, by the fountain in the garden? It seemed to me as if I first found you there. You have made me curse that day. Well, you have been frank, at least. Good-bye, then. It sounds strange even now. Good-bye. You have left me alone—alone for ever.’

He would have withdrawn his hand, but she held it closer, sank her head on it, her eyes full of relenting tears. O, that loneliness which he had been the first to break! She wanted to go back into it, but it was dark and cold.

She was sobbing violently, convulsed by mental agitation. He came nearer, put his arm round her protectingly. Even now she did not attempt to speak. It was enough—they stood silent, motionless, reconciled. The minutes flew too fast. Gervase had prevailed. From that moment he knew she was his own, whatever betide.

‘Answer me something,’ he said playfully, at parting.

‘I promise—’

‘When shall we go to Italy?’

‘In a month’s time we are going to a little house that has been lent to Araciel for the summer, near Naples.’

‘Italy—Naples,’ said Gervase, well pleased. ‘At a month’s end, then, I take your promise.’

CHAPTER XXXI.

PERIL.

COME into the South. Rome, to tell the truth, is cold and stern and monumental, for all her splendour in ruins; so we leave her to the northward far, to escape awhile into a milder air and a softer scene.

Beyond Naples, fairest of sea-cities, lies a region stamped with an ineffaceable beauty, unlike anything else to be met with throughout the land of Italy. The picture is imperfect; for human nature is degraded here, and poverty festers in the hovels; but the great calm, the wide bright sea, the sprinkled islets and graceful promontories infuse gladness into us through our eyes.

July is over, and the vines are heavy with unplucked grapes; purple figs drop from the trees; the ripe pomegranates are bursting open; the seeds fall out of the scarlet fruit as it hangs by the orange flower. The high-road is arid and dusty; the wild wayside blossoms are seared, the sycamore-trees scorched and yellowed by the sun. Autumn is there already; but down towards the Mediterranean stretches a wilderness of fresher green; a tangled underwood of wild fruit-trees; plantations of gnarled olives, with low aloe-hedges between; and here and there the ground slopes gently away to the blue water's brink, a stony headland juts out, and the waves wash round where the low pines dip in their branches.

A small house stands *perdu* somewhere amid a mass of luxuriant vegetation reaching to the edge of the sea-cliffs, that here rise high and inaccessibly steep. The house is invisible from both approaches, by land and water, and hard to find. It is a mile

away from the road, and the labyrinthine footpaths running between high stone walls with thick groves behind, whereby, after many wanderings, it may be reached at last, seem designed expressly for the purpose of misleading the traveller. It is called the Villa Incognita, and the story goes that, in the French wars, a fugitive prince lay concealed here for long unmolested, whilst the environs were being searched for him. The owner, a young Italian *marchese*, prefers Paris to this home of his fathers, and lets it when he can. Is it inhabited now? No one has been seen to arrive by the front entrance, looking landwards, where a trellised porch opens upon a courtyard adorned with faded frescoes; whence you pass into the narrow path by which the initiated will thread their way rightly into the high-road. Yet voices are often heard in the garden that are not those of the housekeeper Teresa and her son, who have charge of the place—young voices talking in a foreign tongue.

Two came there from Naples one evening. The sea was calm and clear, and the light breeze just filled the lazy white sail. The friends who had gone down to the quay Santa Lucia to see them off smiled and waved their hands cheerfully to the girl seated on the cushions by the helm. Propelled vigorously by six oars, the boat was very soon at a distance, and the group on shore turned as sad as though those emigrants were bound for another continent, instead of a two hours' sail. Still they watched wistfully; the skiff grew smaller and smaller, till it was like a nautilus-shell floating on the surface. But the songs of the rowers, lustily bellowed by strong southern voices, reached them still in snatches.

The sounds died gradually, the figures in the boat became indistinguishable, and blank grew the countenances of the four left behind, out there in the cold.

Araci, dejected, looked helplessly at his wife. Up to this point she had heroically refrained from tears; but they burst forth irresistibly at his disconsolate speech.

'We have lost her, Felicia. It is all over. Good-bye!'

Herewith Domenico fell to blubbering aloud. Only Cherubina's eyes were dry.

'Don't be so silly,' she said. 'What does it signify, since she is quite happy—happier than with us? And there's no use in standing looking into the water. Come home.' And Cherubina, who now ruled the house, marshalled her parents and brother off to the modest tenement in the suburbs, where the family were spending their saddened holiday. Meantime the boat is speeding in the opposite direction.

Over the bay it came. Castellamare is left behind. The scattered islands, Procida, Ischia, the Sphinx-rock, Capri, the headlands that break the coast-line, take all imaginable shades of purple in the sunset, then fade to gray. The rowers are coasting the shore, where the land lies level with the water's surface, and the voyagers can hear the murmur of the wind in the sea-pines. Along past clusters of fishermen's cottages, the outspread nets drying on the shingle, to where high scarped rocks, honeycombed with huge caves, rise boldly, and the boat is suddenly swallowed up in their black shadow.

Underneath is a private landing-place belonging to the Villa Incognita. A flight of stairs cut through the hollow rock leads upwards, and the new-comers emerge in a

garden of lemon-trees. The scent of the spring blossoms here seems to linger on all the year round; the hot sun never pierces through the dark foliage; the cool earth beneath is overspread by a tangle of trailing plants and flowers. Huge pumpkins and gourds cumber the ground, and a small unweeded path leads up to the Villa Incognita, buried here out of sight and mind of natives and tourists alike.

That was Laurence's bridal journey. Such was the intense seclusion of this their chosen retreat, that a month later the presence and movements of the occupants remained something of a mystery, and their name and nation a disputed point, among the village gossips. But often, in the early mornings, the peasants coming down from the hills, bringing fruit and vegetables to the market-boat, the dark-eyed donkey-boys on the way to their hiring-place, meet the strangers mounting the heights, and stop to remark to one another on the beauty of the signora and invoke blessings on the generous signor, who, out of his abundance, flings them *bajocchi* without counting.

On other days, when the sea is auspicious, the strangers sail over to Capri, skirt in their boat the cliff-girt iale of a hundred caves, or shoot beyond, to the strange rocks known as the Islands of the Sirens, a sea-birds' haunt, but otherwise desolate.

And in the evening the Sorrentine girls come down and dance the Tarantella, in the tiled kitchen below or the covered balcony above,—barefooted, wild-looking young creatures; and Teresa, the old *donna di casa*, sits by, like a Fate, and beats the tambourine, to aid their evolutions, with a saturnine smile on her lips. Or the idlers let the hours slip by in

the *loggia*, under a canopy of vines, where a cool breeze comes up after sundown, fresh from the sea, of which there is a peep here through the garden-trees.

And the nights—'not made for slumber,' too beautiful for that. There is silence in heaven and on earth; and it is pleasant to go wandering there in the garden-shade. The dark sky is quite clear, the stars are big and brilliant, and the summer lightning glows in the west.

The sun had dropped; there was an after chill in the air that night. Laurence drew her shawl closer round her as they stood on the cliff's edge, watching the fisher-boats putting out from shore, each with its tiny lantern in the prow, studding the surface everywhere, like sparks of the sea.

'*Amico*,' she began suddenly, 'when we leave this place—'

Gervase broke in quickly,

'Leave it! Renza, why must you talk of that to-night? Tired already of it and our time here together?'

'Hush!' she said, with a smile, 'and let me finish. It is a foolish feeling I have; but I think, when we go from here, I should like the sea or the lava to come over the villa and its gardens, and bury them, so that no one should come here afterwards, and we have been the last.'

He smiled.

'Only I cannot bear to hear you talk of our going away.'

'Forgive me, *amico*,' she said presently; 'but the fear that crossed me a moment ago was that you yourself were wearying of all this. When the sun dropped, and the view that had been so bright before turned suddenly cold and gray, I thought a shade came over your face. Was it fancy?'

'No,' he said. 'Are you superstitious, Renza?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Nor I,' he rejoined. 'Still, these last three days—lay it to the scirocco if you will—I have been haunted by a depression. Don't look at me with those large frightened eyes; I shall make you laugh presently when I tell you. The dread that haunts me must be a dread of losing you, since there is nothing else I mind particularly.'

'Gervase?'

'Yes, the idea takes possession of me; and then life becomes a misery of fear, the sun goes under a cloud, and my own happiness seems to be mocking me.'

'It is an evil spirit that is troubling you,' she said, smiling.

'How shall I charm it away?'

'Shall I tell you?'

She looked up.

'Come and sit in the *loggia* and play to me. That will exorcise the fiend, for this time, perhaps for good. You have not tried yet.'

She laughed. They sauntered back to the villa, and climbed a little outer wooden staircase, leading from the verandah to the *pergola* above. Laurence had not once touched her violin since they came, and felt oddly reluctant to take it up to-night. He was importunate. Her music would spirit away the feverish fancies born of scirocco, as nothing else could do.

At the intersection of three narrow footways, a few paces from the villa, at the point where its apricot-coloured walls first showed themselves through the leafy screen, two figures were loitering in the dusk—a man and a woman—disputing in whispers. He was insisting on something obstinately. She replied at length, as obstinately casting doubt on his confident assertion.

Half-way in her speech she stopped short, as a penetrating sound broke on the evening stillness. Music in the villa, striking with a fantastic and unearthly effect through the solitude and night air. The pair listened motionless awhile, holding their breath. Then he spoke,

'I told you so. A likely thing I should mistake! I'

Linda made no answer. She leaned back against the stone wall, moodily resting her chin on her hand.

'Are they happy in there or not?' he said tauntingly. 'Does the thought of us out here, and others whom he has trampled down in his way, trouble his amusement? Such as we are do not count.'

Linda hid her face.

'It is the way of the world,' she urged helplessly; 'and we cannot hurt them now, Bruno, do what we would.'

'That was not how you spoke to me once,' he returned, with a menacing look, 'when you came to me in Rome a month ago, and made that scene. Recollect what you said,—that he was passing through on his way from England to Naples, to make that girl his wife, and that you could not live and see them happy together. You said you had tried to separate them, and failed. You had found out what I had kept from you, that he was the Englishman who had sent me to the galleys; and you prayed me to help you to some revenge. So I should have done without your asking, but for the cursed accident that drove me from Rome, and has made an outlaw of me again. But it is not too late. We can strike here.'

She looked at him suspiciously.

'What do you mean?'

'He slighted you before,' said Bruno cunningly; 'he would do

more now if he dared. He met you like a stranger, you said. Now he would thrust you away like a beggar or a thief. But you let it be, tamely, slavishly—turn the other cheek.'

'Bruno,' said Linda, in a harsh strained voice, 'do you want to madden me, that you talk like this? Let me go.'

'You resent nothing, you women,' he said roughly. 'You are only fit to be treated so—like playthings or lapdogs. Stay, then, and enjoy yourself in your own way. You came to look on at his good fortune, I suppose? You are content to stand by meekly without lifting a finger, when you could spoil it for him, if you would.'

'How?'

'Show yourself.'

'What for? I can do them no harm. What can I say to him that he would mind?' she asked bitterly.

'I will tell you what to say.'

'I don't like to be a messenger between you,' she said uneasily. 'It is true you said you did not mean anything—no harm to him—but I do not believe you.'

'Fool!' he ejaculated under his breath. 'What can I wish him but harm? I am not one like you, to be trodden on and not pay it back. If I were you, I should know how to spoil his peace. For myself, what I intend is to extort from him, through you, whatever reparation I choose to ask.'

'Ah, the money?' Linda searched his face; the expression but half reassured her.

'To get quit of you and me,' Bruno resumed, 'he would pay twice or thrice what I want. Try, and you will see.'

A *contadina* going home stopped to stare at the strangely-assorted couple whispering in the shadow of the wall. It was too dark for

her to perceive the full discrepancy between their attire, else it would have puzzled her indeed to explain how the signora, staying at the fashionable and expensive hotel-pension on the heights, came to be discoursing thus familiarly with a man of the common people.

They hushed, and waited till the clang of the wooden shoes on the paved footpath had died away. Meantime the voices in the villa-garden caught their ear, the gay, glad voices of the lovers. Gervase, his depression gone, had risen to the extreme of high spirits. A playful word, a little laugh, came to the eavesdroppers every now and then. They could follow their footsteps as they rambled in and out among the trees, pulling flowers and oranges; then lingering by the bush of white lilies, scentless all day, but whose fragrance perfumes the air nightly, from sunset to sunrise. Then a door shut, and all was still.

'He will come out of the house again presently alone, by the porch,' whispered Bruno, pointing to the courtyard, 'and pass this way. Sometimes he walks as far as the village. It is your moment.'

Linda shrank.

'I dare not,' she faltered. 'And why should I go? Just to make him hate me worse.'

He laughed, flung away her hand, saying, with bitter derision,

'I knew you would play false at the last—knew you would cringe to your lot, and why. By heaven, you women—you deserve the worst you get! Don't think to blind me; you love him still.'

'Love him?' repeated Linda, pale with anger.

Bruno cut short the protest she was preparing.

'Don't bandy words. Go to him, and say—'

He stooped to whisper in her

ear. Still Linda wavered. Once more she heard their voices, coming now from the *loggia* on the opposite side of the house; something in those accents made her wild.

The sounds ceased. There was now only one figure in the lane; the man had disappeared.

Gervase came to the entrance-door, stepped into the courtyard, lit a cigar leisurely, and looked at his watch. It was late, too late for his accustomed evening walk into the village to the post-office. He would just finish his cigar outside in the lanes, and then go in again.

He strolled a few steps down the path, and noticed a female figure on a stone seat at the junction of the cross-paths; doubtless an inmate of one of the villa-pensions in the neighbourhood, some English or German romantic lady, in search of moonlight impressions or inspirations.

As he approached she rose suddenly, with a brusque movement that arrested his attention. It was far too dark to discern her features, but a suspicion had suggested itself already before she could speak.

'Good-evening.'

He knew the voice at once. For a moment he stood transfixed.

'I am afraid I startled you,' she resumed; 'but have I grown so ugly that you start back from me as if I were a spider or a scorpion?'

Gervase, who had recovered almost instantly from his first surprise, was regarding her distrustfully.

'What are you doing here, Linda?' he said gravely, but not unkindly.

'I am *en pension* at the hotel yonder,' said Linda composedly. 'I suppose I have as good a right to be there as any one else. Or

have you made yourself proprietor of the whole *piano di Sorrento*, and ordained that no one is to live or breathe there but you and your bride?

Gervase did not trust himself to speak.

'You would give a thousand pounds at this moment, confess it,' said Linda audaciously, 'to have me well out of the Naples principality.'

'Perhaps,' he said.

'Don't be afraid I shall ask for it. For my part, I prefer to stay here; I like the place immensely.'

Gervase was at the last extreme of torturing suspense and perplexity. Here was an insanely jealous, unscrupulous, capricious woman, bent on mischief, it appeared.

'I have an errand to you,' she said abruptly.

'You have?'

'From my brother, Bruno Pagano.'

For the moment, annoyance, anxiety, everything gave way.

'Bruno Pagano!' he repeated, astounded. 'Do you mean to say you and he are related?'

'It is news to you, then, as I expected,' said Linda coldly. 'I too learnt first, a few weeks ago, that the English gentleman, thanks to whom the only relative I have in the world has been suffering false imprisonment, was—Mr. Gervase Damian.'

He was silent, his brow contracted.

'Any reparation I can make,' he said constrainedly, 'you may tell him I shall be willing to offer.'

'Some amends you can make,' said Linda. 'He is in trouble again.'

Gervase did not say he was sorry, and his brow cleared perceptibly, as Linda added,

'And anxious to leave Italy.'

'Where is he now, then?'

'I don't know,' she answered hastily. A slight rustling in the trees behind the wall was heeded by her alone, and she proceeded: 'He was implicated in the disturbances last month at Florence, and had to fly. His retreat he keeps secret, even from me; it is safer, he says. But we are in—correspondence. What he wishes is to get to America, where he has friends. He would embark the first chance he got, but he is poor to emigrate. Will you give him what he wants—two hundred pounds?'

'What is his scrape now?' asked Gervase.

'Ah, you are afraid of committing yourself,' said Linda dryly; 'but you may be quite easy. Bruno took no part in the riot; but he could not have cleared himself without implicating comrades of his. Will you help him now, or not?'

'I have no objection; but how is the sum to reach him—through you?'

'As you please,' she said oddly. 'You can think it over, and let me know.' She moved away, and seemed to be going.

'And yourself,' he asked quickly. 'Is it your intention to stay?'

'You have no right to question me, or interfere with my plans,' she retorted.

'None,' he said, incensed. 'I know you now, and how far I ever was from knowing you before, when I thought if you had one virtue, it was generosity. Be assured of this—that I care no longer what you do. Any mad action you may choose to commit will recoil only on yourself. For your own sake I desired that you should not sink further than you have done. Go your own way, since you are bent on it.'

He was turning away. When it came to this—to his leaving her in anger—all Linda's fostered hostility forsook her and fled.

'Stay,' she said beseechingly; 'and don't speak to me so—don't look at me in that terrible way—and I will promise anything you wish—promise never to cross your path any more; indeed there is no fear I shall trouble you again. Soon I shall be!—the confession, 'married to Count Janowski,' was on her lips, but her brother had forbidden her to make it—'out of your way. But let me think that this, the last time I saw you, you still had a kind word left—for me.'

'Linda,' said Gervase moderately, 'I shall not think unkindly of you, unless you force me. It was on your brother's account you came here; he wants money. That's what you came to say. He is welcome to it. That is my answer.'

Steps and voices were heard approaching—a company of tour-

ists taking a starlight stroll. Linda slid away; she must not be seen talking to a stranger. There were hotel-acquaintances of hers among them, and she joined the party, and walked off with them. Gervase was left standing at the cross-roads, paler than when Linda had met him, and with knit brows. It was at least half an hour before he felt thoroughly master of himself. Then he reentered the villa.

When all had long been still, the rustling in the bushes was heard again; then a scramble, and Bruno's head appeared over the wall. With low-muttered maledictions on its height he clambered down again into the lane. He looked at the Villa Incognita; the moonshine was reflected on the green-shuttered windows.

'I was a fool to take a woman for an ally,' he said. 'Those tools turn against one. Why, the Englishman was round her in a moment with his smooth tongue. But she shall serve me yet.'

ON THE ADVANTAGES OF LIVING IN A POOR NEIGHBOURHOOD.

I HAVE no quarrel with Fortune—quite the contrary—no crow to pluck with the dear old dame, so she need not trouble herself to bring any bag to put the feathers in.

And yet it so happens I find myself residing in a poor neighbourhood, one which at first sight seems, and for all I can tell actually may be, a great drop in the social scale, whilst no proportionate saving is effected, as far as pecuniary matters are concerned.

I gave up a large house—one which, to speak within bounds, was twice too large for my requirements—left a good neighbourhood for one which, though possibly eminently respectable, cannot be called genteel, and the result is that a reduction of expense to the value of perhaps ten shillings a week may be managed.

Still there are advantages, when a man is himself poor, attached to living in a neighbourhood still poorer. It is like putting on an old coat or easy slippers, or taking off one's clothes and going to bed after travelling for a long time by an express-train.

If people could only think so, it is better and happier to be a trifle above their surroundings than the same trifle below; it is pleasant to set the feet down firmly after standing on tip-toe—to feel rates, taxes, rent, manageable evils; and to know, if you were sold up for any one of the three, none of your neighbours would regard the operation with amazement, or experience any

other emotion as regards such a transaction save the purest and liveliest sympathy.

A locality where, if there be a failure in the water-supply, it is instantly concluded the gracious stream has been summarily cut off; where every one apparently finds some difficulty in making the two ends meet; where, in the simplest and most unaffected manner, people perform their household work for themselves; where no person is ashamed of honest labour, seeming to consider, indeed, the new-comer who apparently does not so labour as an anomaly, is, believe me, a better neighbourhood for the man out of elbows with Fortune than one where all around him are striving to appear richer, greater, grander than they actually are.

In London nowadays so little is really known of the state of any man's affairs, that the mere act of making a show is sufficient to stamp him in the opinion of his neighbours as rich; and it is for this reason that any thoughtful observer who likes to bend his steps towards what is called a good suburb must stand amazed to note the evidences of affluence, the enormous growth of luxury, the last twenty years have produced in the metropolis.

'Who pays for all this?' he asks himself as he looks at the magnificently furnished houses, at the windows aglow with flowers, at the carriages standing at the doors, at the horses pawing the ground, at the liveried men-

servants, the trim maids, the splendidly dressed ladies, the very little children tricked out as, on the face of the earth, surely children were never tricked out before.

And then he remembers there are certain things called bankruptcies and liquidations and arrangement, and so forth; and he knows pretty well what the end of all this pomp and show will be for many, if not most, who are lording it now.

He considers those who flourished like the green bay-tree and then were not; and he knows perfectly well, if he returns to the same neighbourhood in a few years' time, the bulk of its present inhabitants will be gone, and that a number of new-comers will be residing in the old houses, 'making believe' more fiercely than the former tenants.

Now this sort of thing does not obtain in our neighbourhood. If there be one extravagance, it is 'curtains'; they are all the same pattern, and most probably were all the same price: there is some variety in their arrangement, but it only consists in this—that whereas in some of the windows they are drawn close to the glass, in others they are hung so as to form the bay into a species of alcove. The visible curtains are all white; but after much earnest inquiry I find in some houses, indeed in many, coloured drapery likewise obtains. This is, however, in a highly ingenious manner placed against the wall, and thus the diverse beauties of the damask and the lace can be viewed separately. It was an old-fashioned idea that the use of curtains was to insure privacy and subdue the glare of a too strong light. We have changed all that. They are not for use any longer, but for ornament; if they were drawn

backwards and forwards, if their trim symmetry were deranged by the hand of reckless man, they never could last a whole season clean, as is the case under the new régime.

It will be admitted, however, that a neighbourhood where 'curtains' form the only tax society demands has great advantages over those more exacting localities where a man has to lie awake half the night considering what society may want next. Once concede the curtains, and you are at liberty to do what you like; nay, the curtains, though usual, are not actually compulsory; you would be thought better of if you conformed to this usage, but you may be thought very well of, indeed, even supposing you do not.

In a poor neighbourhood such as this there is nothing short of lying, stealing, or blaspheming you may not do with perfect impunity. You may haggle at the gate with a tradesman carrying his stock about on a barrow drawn by a donkey, and no one will think you mad. If you have a fancy for picking out four fresh herrings for a penny, you can do it an' you please. You may even fetch the dinner-beer or a pint of milk, and the proceeding will not be regarded with astonishment. It is competent for you to go to bed when you like and get up when you like, and do what you like generally if you can. You may have visitors, or you may have none—the mind of our neighbourhood will think either course perfectly natural. You may paint the outside of your house yourself, and society in our neighbourhood will not feel scandalised. If you go out early in the morning it is certain you are in some line of business which compels you to get off by a work-

man's train, perhaps with a workman's ticket. If you stay at home till midday it is concluded you are out of a situation.

Were you disposed to sit for your portrait as a gentleman of elegant leisure, it would avail you nothing. In some shape or form we are all workers in our neighbourhood; there are no drones amongst us; we have all to earn our bread hardy; we all know it, and therefore nonsense about the matter would be quite out of place.

It is this total absence of nonsense which constitutes one enormous advantage of a poor neighbourhood to any one accustomed to reside where a certain amount of pretence is more or less imperative. In a poor neighbourhood a man may be not merely honest towards the world at large, but, a far more important matter, be honest to himself. He is relieved from the necessity of keeping up the semblance of competence when his pockets are almost empty, of considering the humours and tempers of tyrannous Mrs. Grundy, of fighting the battle his common sense tells him is necessary against the foes which spring up at every turn in society to encounter impetuous humanity.

And it is a good thing to dwell for a time in a poor neighbourhood in order to grasp how happy men and women can be on little; to note the simple pleasures of their quiet lives; to learn what a blessing work is; to understand that he who is not afraid of facing Saturday night, who can honestly pay his humble way, may know such peace and contentment as many accounted to be envied sigh for in vain.

There are no pianos in our neighbourhood, an advantage not lightly to be overlooked. After suffering agonies at the hands of

performers good, bad, and indifferent, ought this fact not to reconcile one to being poor at once?

Two harmoniums are the only musical instruments within five minutes' walk, and they are only to be heard when the inevitable practising for Sunday's vocal exercises is in progress. A barrel-organ occasionally strays into our neighbourhood, but not often. Happily we earn our pennies too hardy to waste many of them on the interesting foreigner.

Any one who comes to reside in a locality such as that indicated, having been previously accustomed to live in places where there is a gulf fixed between riches (or the semblance of them) and even the appearance of poverty, must find it advantageous to note the strides civilisation is making amongst those who are to be our 'future masters.'

How well they dress; how neat in their persons; how cleanly; how well housed!

Here, for five-and-twenty pounds a year, or even less, a man may command conveniences and luxuries many a great lady in former times would have sighed for in vain. And above and beyond all external evidences of progress is the courtesy of manner to be noticed in our poor neighbourhood—the carefulness not to intrude, the readiness to help, the kindly thoughtfulness evidenced in the nosegay of flowers gathered with the dew on them, or the basket of vegetables placed in some convenient spot for your acceptance. Now if you think that all these people, and thousands like them, have been and are pursuing their simple way through the world without any assistance from you, it may shake your own egotism a little. Their concerns are as important to them, as deeply in-

teresting, as the Premiership to Mr. Gladstone. Their day of small things of quite as much account to them as the Eastern question to kings and statesmen.

Not in our particular neighbourhood, but close by, a butcher's shop is being built, which excites the admiration of many worthy people, who stand and stare at it as they would not stand and stare at Cleopatra's Needle.

The other evening two old men (gentlemen they are called here, where all distinctions of rank seem to have got shuffled) were discussing this triumph of architecture.

'A *splendid* shop,' said one, '*fit for a nobleman!*'

And where, the reader may

inquire, is this Arcadia? Ah, that is my secret, and one I mean to keep! Were it made public, we should have poor gentility swooping down upon us, and destroying all our comfort.

As already stated, one way and another, the saving to the writer of living in a poor neighbourhood is small; but the mental relief is great. Slippers and easy coats—pooh! What are these in comparison to being free from visitors and Mrs. Grundy, and the thousand and one crazing and irritating demands which, in the routine of daily life, in even moderately wealthy localities, tax the patience and try the temper of a man who has to earn his bread before he may eat it!

THE OMEN OF THE LEAF—A RIVERSIDE FANCY.

(From the French of Madame Amable Tastu.)

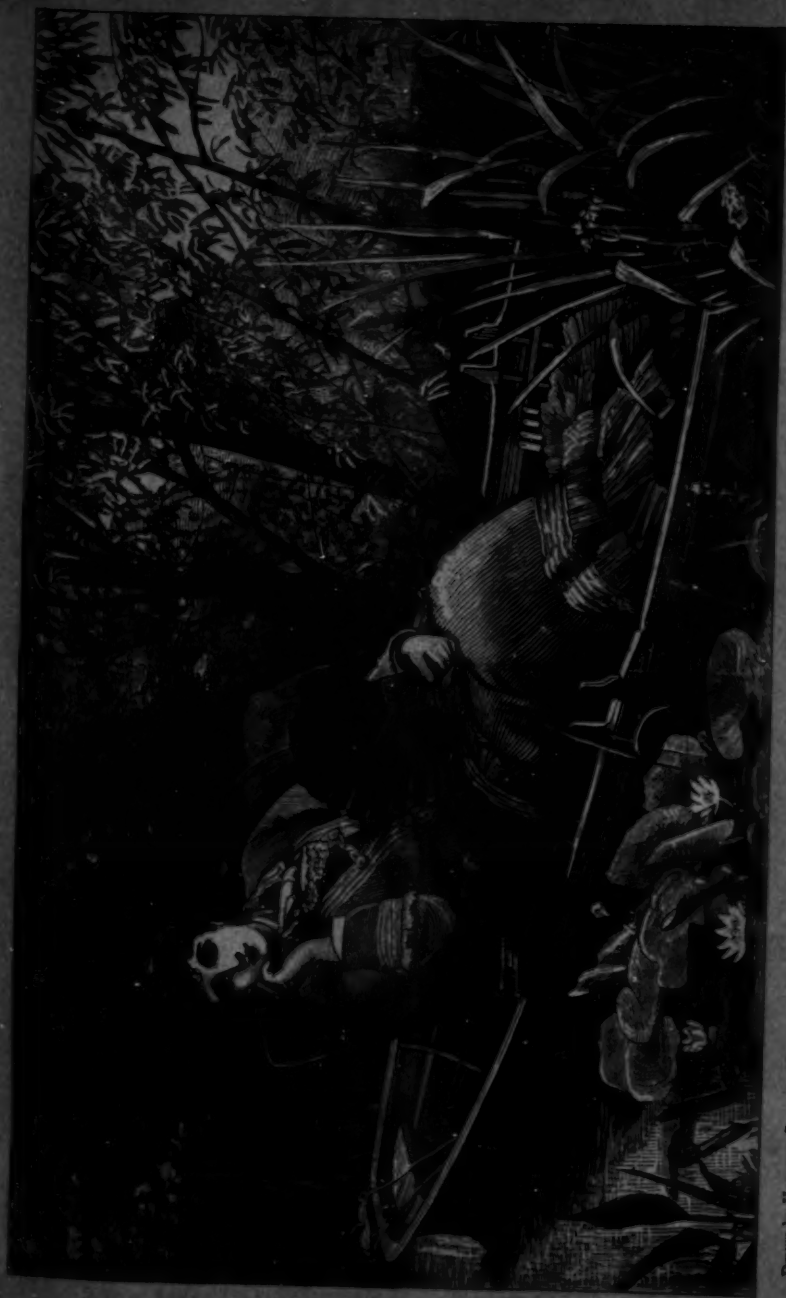
THE air was pleasant; the last autumn day,
With its sad parting, bore away

The garland from the tree:
I looked, and, lo, before me passed
The sun, the autumn, life at last—
One company.

Upon the stream, amid my musing grief,
Silently fell a withered leaf:

I looked and thought.
The light leaves casting one by one
I watch, as on the stream they run
The course each taketh.

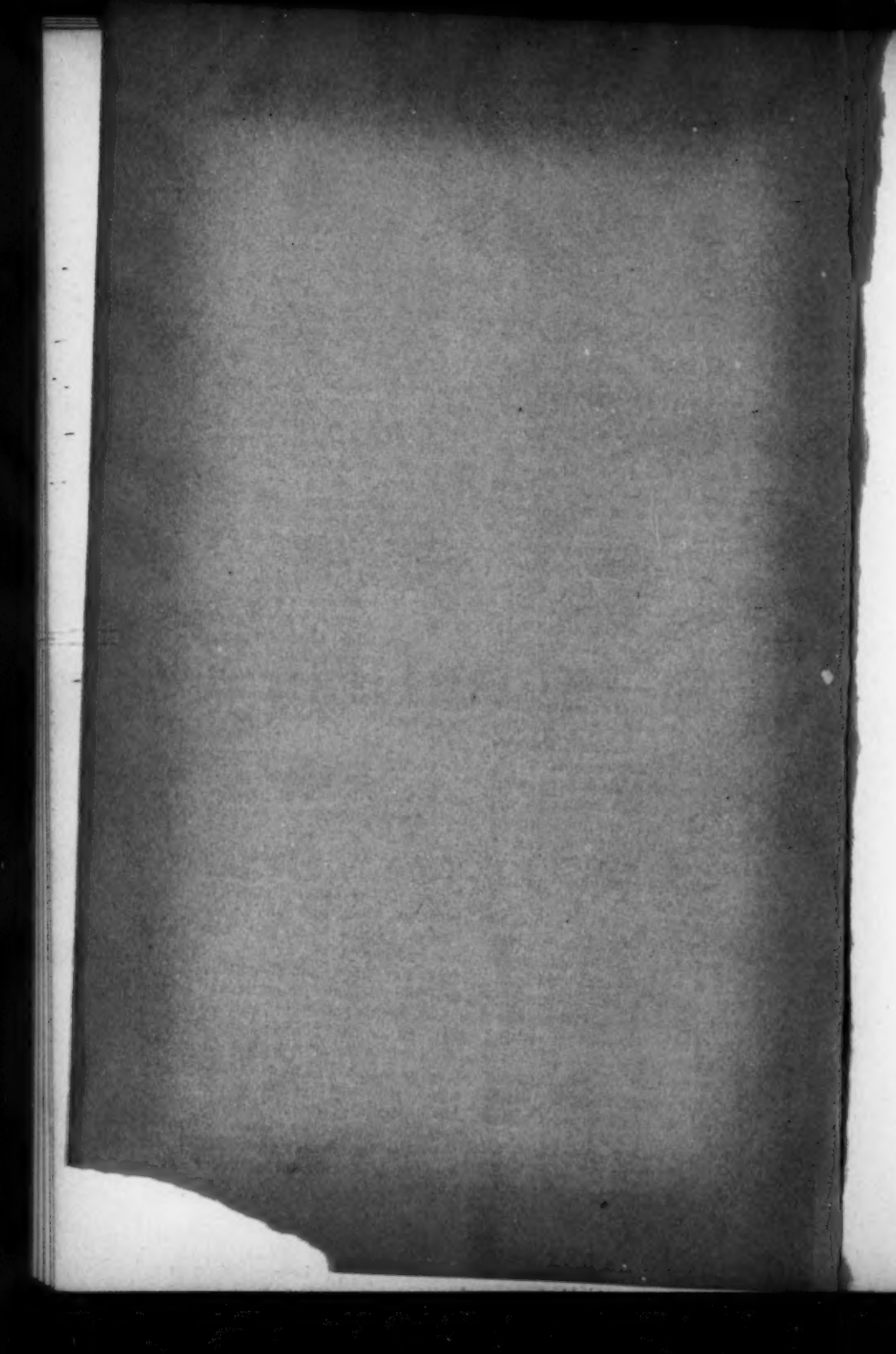
O folly of my fancy's idle play!
I asked each broken fragment on its way
Of future years:
Linked to thy fortune, let me see
What is my fate of life to be—
Gladness or tears?



Drawn by HARRIS BARNETT.]

THE OMEN OF THE LEAF—A RIVERSIDE FANCY.

See the Verses.



LOVE AND WAR.*

By R. MOUNTENEY JEPHSON,

AUTHOR OF 'TOM BULLKLEY OF LISSINGTON,' 'A PINK WEDDING,' ETC.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It is not extraordinary for people to be blinded by their own tears; but old Bolitho was frequently blinded by other people's. By 'other people' is of course meant women. Men's tears, from their rarity, are hardly worth taking into account. When men cry it is, in nine cases out of ten, dotage or drink, though there are occasions of course when a man can play the woman with his eyes without any slur on his manhood. If Mr. Bolitho had not been an old bachelor he might have taken matters more calmly; but the mackintosh of matrimonial experience had not descended on his shoulders and rendered him water-proof to these bitter showers, and whenever one burst over him he was invariably drenched through and through by it. So, as he strode on his mission of winning Mr. Buddlecombe back to the path of virtue, he felt nothing, he saw nothing, but Mrs. Buddlecombe's tears, and he burned—as unslaked lime burns under the influence of water—to wipe her eye in one sense, and another eye, Mr. Buddlecombe's, in another sense.

On arriving at the supposed Lothario's study-door, Mr. Bolitho applied his knuckles to it with a

* The author reserves to himself the right of dramatising this story, or any portion of it.

virtuous indignation that nearly sent them through the panel. Now to every gentleman there is something specially sacred about his study. No matter if he never performs any more important operation there than paring his nails or answering an invitation, he persists in looking at it as a hallowed spot dedicated to that immortal part of himself—his mind. Mr. Buddlecombe on this, as on most other points, was even more combustible than the generality of gentlemen, and to have his study-door thus rudely assailed very nearly amounted to a personal assault. So there was a great deal more than met the ear of Mr. Bolitho in the responsive 'Come in,' which, indeed, as far as pitch and tone went, sounded a great deal more like 'Get out!'

'Bolitho,' snarled Mr. Buddlecombe, as the door was opened, 'I was under the impression that the use of the battering-ram had gone out with the fall of the Roman Empire; but you have just undeceived me.'

'Look here, Buddlecombe,' said old Bolitho, dropping the usual familiar 'Buddle,' and addressing the friend of his boyhood with marked severity by his patronymic in full, 'I'm not in the mood for bandying words. I have something serious to say to you, something *very* serious.'

'Have you really?' said Mr. Buddlecombe, still smarting under

the affront to his study-door, and venting his wrath under a cloak of sarcasm which fitted him but indifferently well. 'Have you really, Bolitho? Now, does that mean you are going to prod me in the ribs, and then blow my head off with a guffaw?'

To this Mr. Bolitho did not deign to reply further than by a savage grunt, as he seized a chair, planted it violently on the floor exactly opposite to Mr. Buddlecombe, and, seating himself upon it, confronted that gentleman with a steadfast stare.

'Allow me, Bolitho, to obtrude three facts on your consideration,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, still on the sarcastic tack. 'First, that chairs are made of a frangible material called wood; secondly, that they possess sufficient stability without ramming their legs through the floor; and thirdly, that you are not sitting for your photograph, with me as the object on which to keep your eye fixed. You will excuse my candour,' concluded the sarcastic gentleman, with the sort of sweet smile a dog gives you when you take a bone from him.

'Yes, I'll excuse your candour, if you've got any; only too glad to do so; but I don't believe you can have a particle,' was the reply.

For once in his life old Bolitho was in a towering rage, and while he boiled over Mr. Buddlecombe simmered quite pleasantly in the consciousness of having at last done unto Bolitho what Bolitho had so often done unto him.

'Keep your temper, my dear fellow,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, quite refreshed by the novel transposition of affairs. 'At your age you should really exercise more control over your angry passions. You are fond of alluding to the days when we were boys together;

pray carry your reminiscences a stage further back to the days of your childhood, and lay to heart the lesson then taught you in the sweet little poem of "Let dogs delight."

I do not know whether it strikes the reader in the same light, but it seems to me that Mr. Buddlecombe lecturing old Bolitho on shortness of temper is about as exquisite a piece of inverted irony as Falstaff twitting the travellers on Gadshill with corpulency or Prince Hal with cowardice.

'I am not ashamed of being in a rage, sir,' retorted Mr. Bolitho, proving his statement by proclaiming it at the top of his voice. 'I am in a rage, sir, and it's only right and natural and proper to be in a rage, sir,' continued old Bolitho, *crescendo-ing* until he roared with righteous wrath.

'Look here, Bolitho,' said Mr. Buddlecombe, still pleasantly tickled, like a child with a fresh toy, by the brand-new sensation of keeping his temper while Bolitho had lost his, 'don't you think you somewhat miscalculate the acoustic properties of this apartment? It contains, I should think, not more than about fifty thousand cubic feet of space, and does not, therefore, absolutely require a voice of twenty trumpet-power in full blast to penetrate even to its farthest corner. I must again ask you to excuse my candour.'

'And I again tell you I don't believe you have any candour to be excused,' was the angry rejoinder. 'Is it candour to carry on a clandestine correspondence with a lady—a lady of dazzling personal attractions? Is it candour to make and keep an assignation with her, the purport of which you are unable to disclose to your wife? Is it candour—'

Here the catechism was cut short by Mr. Buddlecombe casting aside the polished rapier of sarcasm, with which he was ludicrously awkward, for the loaded bludgeon of abuse, a weapon he was more at home with.

'Mind your own business, you old fool!' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe.

A furious *tu quoque*, coupled with an asseveration that it *was* his business, rose to Mr. Bolitho's lips, when reason's voice, which up to now had been all but drowned in Mrs. Buddlecombe's tears, whispered to him that he must not be too sure of that; and, though the tones were still rather water-logged and weak, they induced Mr. Bolitho to pause and ponder in this wise: Perhaps he *had* been hasty; perhaps he *had* leaped without looking, and had consequently floundered into a quagmire of illusion; and, after all, might not Mr. Buddlecombe engage in some perfectly innocent transaction with a lady, concerning which it were better to be reticent with his wife, on the principle Harry Percy pursued towards his 'gentle Kate'—

'Constant you are;
But yet a woman, and for secrecy
No lady closer; for I well believe
Thou wilt not utter what thou dost not
know—

And so far will I trust thee, gentle
Kate.'

But there could not be the same objection to confidence in a man when that man had been a friend from boyhood. Such were pretty nearly the thoughts which Mr. Bolitho, with all traces of passion gone from his countenance, proceeded to put into words.

'Come, come, Buddle, old friend, I have been hasty. I have been led away by appearances, but I have no doubt you will be able in a few words to clear away the clouds of misappre-

hension, and put things in their proper light. Tell me the whole truth; or, if you are bound by secrecy, it will be sufficient for me if you give your word that there is nothing in the matter your wife or I, or any other honourable-minded man or woman, would consider wrong. I ask this more for Mrs. Buddlecombe's sake than for my own.'

Now, of the two persons, as the reader may well imagine, Mr. Buddlecombe would have preferred his wife as a confidant, had confession to one or the other been obligatory, and Mr. Bolitho's last move was a false one.

'Confound your assurance, sir!' thundered Mr. Buddlecombe, his ire rising as suddenly as Mr. Bolitho's had fallen—a see-saw by no means uncommon between two people having a difference of opinion. 'What right have you to demand an explanation of any course of conduct I may choose to pursue?'

'I have no right to demand one,' replied Bolitho, keeping his temper wonderfully well; 'but I should imagine that any victim of a groundless suspicion would be only too ready to give an explanation which would clear himself in the eyes of any one, most of all in the eyes of the best of wives and the oldest of friends. By our old friendship, Buddlecombe, I conjure you to give me this explanation.'

'And by our old friendship I won't do anything of the sort. Look here, Bolitho, it's my opinion that that same friendship is so old that it's worn out—worn threadbare, sir, and the texture will no longer stand the strain of any prying impertinence or confounded familiarity. Do you understand me, or shall I endeavour to make my meaning plainer?'

Still old Bolitho kept his tem-

per, and continued his remarks as if the insulting rejoinder to his appeal on the grounds of old friendship had not been spoken.

'I admit there may be some good reason for withholding an explanation from your wife, because, with all their beautiful traits of character, women do not possess the knack of keeping a secret. But with me that objection cannot hold good.'

'You want an explanation, do you?'

'Yes, I do; and mainly in order that I may, if it's a good one, set your dear good wife's mind at rest.'

'Then you may go to the Antipodes, or any other place you choose, in search of it, for you won't find it here. And the sooner you're off on your travels the better.'

Now old Bolitho's nature positively overflowed with the milk of human kindness, but there *was* a point when that milk could become sour. Good-nature carried too far becomes contemptible. A man whom you could not kick into a rage would be—notwithstanding his undoubted claims to be considered an extraordinarily good-natured mortal—a very paltry fellow indeed. That Mr. Bolitho now lost his temper can no longer be denied.

'There's only one conclusion I can come to, then,' he said, raising his voice and bringing his clenched fist down on the table with a mighty blow; 'and considering your age, your position, your good charming wife, your sweet innocent daughter, and the pure home you have defiled, it's my opinion that you're a confounded old reprobate. Now, sir, do *you* understand *me*, or shall I endeavour to make *my* meaning plainer?'

'Get out of my house, sir!' said Mr. Buddlecombe, beside himself

with passion, and trembling from head to foot, as he sprang to his feet. 'I order you out of my house, sir! And if you won't go, I'll have you removed by force. There's the door, sir; and I'd advise you to go peaceably through it, unless you prefer being thrown out of the window!'

As the accomplishment of Mr. Bolitho's defenestration would have required a steam-crane, beside other appliances, the absurdity of the threat deprived it of its offensiveness, and the old gentleman recovered a great deal of his temper as he walked towards the door.

'There is no occasion, sir, to use force,' he remarked, as he opened the door and turned round. 'In the first place, I doubt whether the force you have at your command would be sufficient for the purpose; in the second place, what has happened this morning is quite sufficient to induce me to leave your house of my own free will.'

The next moment the door had closed between the two quondam friends.

That evening's post, so eagerly watched for, brought no tidings from Algernon Warriner to Florence. He had written her a long loving letter, telling her of his sudden departure for Malta, and begging her to write at once to him there; but these written words, instead of gladdening the anguish-stricken soul of poor Florence, wasted their sweetness in minute fragments on the desert air of Mr. Buddlecombe's waste-paper basket.

There is a little to be said in extenuation of Mr. Buddlecombe's conduct, and as it is so very little we had better give him the benefit of it. The day, teeming, as it had been, with provocation—for some-

thing bitter had risen with nearly every hour—had left him at its close barely accountable for his actions. In short, the effect on his excitable temperament had been such as to almost unhinge his mind for the time being, and render it, if not quite dead, singularly callous to all sense of right and wrong.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE Buddlecombes were no longer a happy family, and as day succeeded day happiness seemed to sink lower and lower beneath the horizon as if steadily about to set for ever. A laugh, a merry jest, or a song was never now heard in the house. Old Joe Bolitho's voice never now reëchoed through it.

Mrs. Buddlecombe was by turns sad, morose, and passionate, according to the view she took, for the time being, of her imagined injury. Florence's poor aching heart was sick with hope deferred. The post never brought her the longed-for letter from the loved one; and this silence, together with his abrupt departure and Agatha Madingley's letter, told her that she had been cast aside as soon as won. Any one of these circumstances without either of the other two would have left her, at all events, hopeful; but all together, they closed every loophole through which the slightest glimpse of hope could be caught.

Mr. Buddlecombe was by no means the least miserable of the three. He often tried to lay the flattering unction to his soul that, under all the circumstances, he had done perfectly right, and was continuing to do perfectly right; for like most other downward courses, his did not begin and end with one step. He tried too to

find approval and comfort, to patch his reputation in his own eyes, with proverbs—that he was only cruel to be kind; that the means would be justified by the end; that the best surgeon was often he who cut the deepest, and so on. But the irrepressible still small voice within told him what hollow tricks these were he was trying to play upon himself. The loss of self-respect outweighed even the loss of his wife's love and of Florence's society.

In short, it was a miserable household. Jealousy, despair, and contempt of self—the three most baneful cankers that can gnaw at the human heart—reigned supreme in it. The light of Mr. Bolitho's jolly old countenance never shone there now. He had at last taken offence, and though he and Mrs. Buddlecombe and Florence still continued to be knit in the strongest bonds of friendship, he never saw them except in their walks abroad or in his own home. This, too, was another source of unhappiness to Mr. Buddlecombe.

'I used to think,' he would often and often say in his heart at this period, 'that to get Joe Bolitho's back up would be about as pleasant a novelty as could possibly be devised; but now that I have accomplished the feat I can't say I enjoy it. I wish we were friends again, but of course I can't make the first advance, and I don't suppose *he* will. Though I knew that eels could become accustomed to being skinned, I should not have thought they would positively miss the operation if it were arrested; but I could fancy it now, judging from my own feelings. Bolitho's guffaw would sound quite musical in the house now, and one of his prods in the ribs would be positively invigorating.'

Even the efforts of the French

cook failed to give unalloyed pleasure, and the ante-prandial perusals of the *menu* were now sweet dreams of the past.

To the military Mr. Buddlecombe ascribed, immediately or remotely, all his trouble, and he waxed, if possible, more bitter than ever against them. But there was yet another trouble threatening, and most assuredly the military were not at the root of *this* evil. *Et tu Brute!* Mr. Buddlecombe might reproachfully have exclaimed to the gaunt spectre which now disturbed his peace of mind. The poor man's, quite as much as the rich man's, curse, the professional agitator, was at work in the manufacturing districts, of which Bradingfield and Puddleton were the centres; and trades-unions and strikes and riots were rife in the land. Already serious riots, accompanied by bloodshed, had occurred in Bradingfield, and Puddleton evinced dangerous symptoms of following the pernicious example.

In this complication of troubles and trials there was only one relief open to Mr. Buddlecombe, and that was to visit the sins of everybody on Spigot's head. Consequently that wretched man dragged on an aspen-like existence, trembling in his shoes from the moment he put them on in the morning until he took them off at night.

One morning, about ten days after the eventful one which had brought such dire evil to the house of Buddlecombe, Florence, who about half an hour previously had started with the intention of paying her dear old godfather a visit, rushed into her mother's room in the keenest distress.

'O mamma, darling mamma!' she exclaimed, 'we have lost our

only stay and comfort now. Mr. Bolitho has gone!'

'Gone!' gasped Mrs. Buddlecombe, in blank dismay. 'Gone where?'

'No one knows. And the old housekeeper is crying her eyes out over it. She says he has been so low-spirited lately, which is such an extraordinary thing with him, that she thought the end of the world must be coming; and this morning early he went off quite unexpectedly, as if he had suddenly made up his mind. And when she asked him where he was going, and how long he would be away, he wouldn't give her any definite answer; but said it was very uncertain, and that we were none of us to bother ourselves about him, as he might be away some time. It's all so awfully mysterious, isn't it? One doesn't know what to think.'

Here Florence, whose broken spirit was now only too prone to tears, buried her pale face in her handkerchief and cried bitterly.

'O dear, O dear!' said Mrs. Buddlecombe, following suit, 'what *shall* we do without him? It was such a consolation to think there was one true man in the world, and that he was so near us. For there is an exception to every rule, and Mr. Bolitho is the exception to the rule that all men are wretches.'

CHAPTER XX.

It is quite a mistaken idea that whistling is necessarily a manifestation of joy or contentment. Neither does it indicate mental vacuity, as in the case of Dryden's Cymon, who 'whistled as he went for want of thought.' Some men often whistle with the persistency, if not with the *verve*, of

a ploughboy o'er the lea when some vast scheme is straining their mental muscle to the utmost, or when worried and perplexed with trouble. I have no intention, nor desire, nor probably ability—though no one knows what he can do until he tries—to write a disquisition on whistling. I merely wish that the reader may not imbibe the erroneous impression that Algernon Warriner was light-hearted or light-headed, when I state that this gallant and smart young officer was whistling a subdued accompaniment to his footsteps as he strode across the ophthalmically dazzling parade-ground at Floriana in Malta on a certain morning some weeks after his arrival at 'the little military hothouse.' It certainly was not out of exuberance of spirits that he whistled. There was probably not a more miserable man in all Malta; except, perhaps, some Maltese contractor, who felt that the conclusion of peace had also been the conclusion of the most remunerative rascality he had ever been engaged in.

As Warriner continued his walk, through the *Puerto Reale* and down the *Strada* of the same name, his mind was, I fear, not occupied, as perhaps it should have been, with the various details connected with the disembarkation of troops and stores, to superintend which was the duty he was now on his way to perform.

As he tramped down the *Strada Reale*, teeming with military life, he nodded cheerily enough to many a passing garrison acquaintance; but beneath the jaunty air was what a jaunty air so often covers—an aching heart. He was tortured with suspense and worried with unpleasant conjectures. Not a letter had he received from

Florence in reply to the numerous ones he had written to her; and where there is a great love there are also great fears, as I think I have already, in the course of this story, had occasion to remark, on the authority of Shakespeare. Then, too, he had lately become a prey to an uncomfortable suspicion that his sudden appointment and removal in hot haste to Malta, for the purpose of performing work well within the ability of any ordinary captain or subaltern in the garrison, was merely, through the agency of his mother's interest at the Horse Guards, an artifice of hers to separate him from the girl he loved.

'If I could only be certain of that,' muttered Warriner to himself, as he continued his walk towards the harbour, where a garrison boat was waiting to take him off to a transport, 'I'd throw up my appointment and go straight home by the next steamer.'

He was just turning this over in his mind, when some way down the street he descried a portly form clad in civilian's clothes, the proprietor of which was apparently asking his way from an orderly. The effect of the spectacle on Warriner was out of all proportion to its commonplace character; for though some of the Maltese laws are strange and arbitrary, there is no statute forbidding fat old gentlemen to walk in the streets of Malta, and if necessary to ask their way of any passer-by they may chance to meet. There was evidently, however, something very extraordinary in the sight of this especial old gentleman asking his way, at least to Warriner, for he stopped short, muttered, 'No, it can't be!' rubbed his eyes, said, 'Yes it is;' added in the same breath, 'No, it isn't!'

stepped out into the road to get a better view, ejaculating at the same time, 'Impossible!' then finally, with the exclamation, 'By Jove, it is!' bore down with full speed on the old gentleman.

'Mr. Bolitho! what brings you here?' exclaimed Warriner, seizing his old friend and admirer by the hand and shaking it heartily, while pleasure, surprise, and fear rose to his mind. The last feeling was uppermost, for the conspicuous absence of old Bolitho's usual jollity and frankness of manner filled the questioner with a dread that something was wrong.

'Look here, Warriner,' returned the old gentleman, 'I'm a bad hand at beating about the bush. It is the blundering nature of the animal always to crash through it, brambles and all. Are you the truest-hearted bravest youngster that ever lived, as I used to think you were, or are you an unmitigated villain?'

'I hope I am as little of the latter as I believe myself to be of the former,' was the manly reply. 'But look here, Mr. Bolitho, I am as bad at beating about the bush as you are. What news of Florry? All my letters to her are unanswered. Tell me what is the meaning of it.'

As Warriner put this last question, he seized Mr. Bolitho's arm with a fierce grip and gazed eagerly into his face.

'Do you really mean to say you have written to her?' asked Mr. Bolitho, the clouds gradually clearing away from his countenance.

'Yes, of course—wrote to her before I left England, again when we touched at Gibraltar, directly we landed here, and by every succeeding opportunity up to the present. But not a line have I received from her. I also wrote

you a letter imploring you to write and let me know what was the matter, but you and it must have crossed each other.'

'My dear boy, I believe you, every word, and I'm delighted to find you're not a villain after all,' exclaimed old Bolitho, his face beaming with joy and affection, as he fairly hugged Warriner.

'Yes, but what about Florry? Is she ill?'

'No, no, she's all right; at least, she will be, when she hears that you're not the scoundrel you've been reported to be on the very best authority; and that you *have* written to her, and that you've *not* deserted her.'

'Deserted her! I should as soon think of deserting the colours in the face of the enemy. Come along,' added Warriner, seizing Mr. Bolitho by the arm and dragging him off. 'I see a long story is required to clear up this mystery, and this is not the place to tell it. Come along. Luckily the club is close by, and we'll go in there.'

In a few moments Mr. Bolitho, very hot, very excited, and very much out of breath, was puffing and blowing in a comfortable chair in a secluded corner of the club smoking-room, while Warriner sat opposite to him, anxiously awaiting the abatement of these emotions to that point when articulation would become possible.

'Dear, dear,' gasped Mr. Bolitho, 'to think now that I shall be the dove bearing back the olive-branch, telling her that the sea of trouble which was overwhelming her has subsided, and that—'

'Come, come, Mr. Bolitho, never mind allegory,' said Warriner, with a good-natured smile. 'Tell me the plain unvarnished tale.'

'Yes, yes, to be sure. Well,

to begin, a couple of mornings or so after you left Puddleton, Florry came to me broken-hearted to tell me she had received a letter from her dearest friend, denouncing you as the most out-and-out scoundrel that ever breathed, and imploring Florry to shun you as she would shun the deadliest poison. Florry would have treated the communication with the most profound contempt had it not come from a friend in whose truth and affection she had the deepest trust.

'And who was the girl?'

'Agatha Madingley, Florence told me her name was. The two were what girls call "bosom-friends" at school.'

'Agatha Madingley! And from what source did she obtain this wonderful knowledge of my iniquitous character?'

'From the very best source, she said—her own father, who had known you from childhood.'

'Old Sir Tripton! Well, I knew he had false teeth, but I did not know he had a heart and a tongue to match. And his motives for traducing me in this way utterly defy even guess-work on my part. However, this is not the settling-day with him. That will come in due course. Pray go on, Mr. Bolitho.'

'Well, there's not much more now. One true loving letter from you would have cleansed poor Florry's breaking heart of the poison this vile calumny had poured into it; but she waited in vain for that antidote, and your silence, taken together with this letter and your abrupt departure, all made out a very black case against you.'

'But why didn't she write to me?'

'My dear boy, if Florry has no false pride—she has true modesty; and would it have been truly

modest in her to have followed, even through the medium of pen and ink, the man who was running away from her? No, no; Ben Jonson didn't know what a true English maiden was if he thought he was describing her when he said, "Let her alone, she will court you."'

'Well, but what became of all my letters?'

'Ah, that I can't tell you. There you bring me to the end of my tether.'

'Yes, but the solution of that mystery does not lie beyond mine; and it is not only between me and the post that the matter will have to be settled,' said Warriner doggedly. 'But there's no use saying anything more about it just now. As the melodramatic ruffian observes, "The time will come." Excuse my interruption.'

'Well, to conclude, I couldn't stand seeing Florry's sweet little face getting thinner and whiter each day; and so at last one morning, after lying awake all night haunted by Florry's miserable little mug—excuse the metaphor—I suddenly made up my mind to start off after you, without telling a soul of my intention. So I packed up my traps, and here I am.'

'God bless you for your kindness, my dear old friend!' said Warriner, again seizing Mr. Bolitho by the hand. 'You have, indeed, made me a bankrupt in gratitude; for I can never repay what I owe you in that coin.'

'Nonsense, my dear boy; to have a warm corner in two such hearts of gold as yours and Florry's is indeed a rich reward for an old fellow like me without kith or kin.'

'Well, I promise you will always have that warm corner in each of those two hearts as long as there is a beat in either of them.'

'Said I to myself, I'll go and break every bone in the villain's body,' observed Mr. Bolitho, in a voice choked with emotion; 'and this is how I'm doing it,' he added, as he rose from his chair and, on his characteristically large scale of doing everything, dropped upon Warriner's shoulder two tears of joy, weighing about one drachm each.

'And now, Mr. Bolitho, what do you think I'm going to do?' asked Warriner, as soon as the old gentleman had smothered his feelings with a silk handkerchief.

'I think I can guess: go straight home with me by the very first opportunity.'

'Exactly so. I shall throw up my appointment here on the Quartermaster-General's staff, which, I believe, has been a mere sham; and as I am on the very best of terms with the General and the Governor, I have not the slightest doubt I shall be able to get leave to proceed at once to England on urgent private affairs. There's a French despatch-vessel starting for Marseilles to-morrow. I know her captain well, and I'm certain he will give us both a passage. Will that suit you?'

Old Bolitho brought his hands together with the report of a small thunder-clap, rubbed them vehemently together for a few seconds, and then expressed his unqualified approval of the plan in the following emphatic terms:

'*Ri-fol-de-rol-ti-tiddle-lol! Ri-fol-de-rol-de-rido!*'

As quickly as steam could carry them over sea and land, Mr. Bolitho and Algernon Warriner travelled to Puddleton; and here thrilling intelligence awaited them. The town's normally even pulse was beating feverishly. Following the pernicious example of Bradingfield, Puddleton had

broken out into open riot. The operatives had put forth impossible demands, and their refusal had led first to a general strike, and then to open defiance of the law. There had been a serious riot; but the Mayor, though urged by his brother magistrates to call out the military, had stubbornly refused to do so. The consequence was, the mob, emboldened by immunity from pains and penalties, had proceeded to acts of greater outrage, until, in order to protect valuable property and still more valuable lives, the Mayor had read the Riot Act, and empowered the local police to fire. Two or three of the rioters had been wounded, one of whom had since died, and Mr. Buddlecombe was denounced as his murderer. Puddleton was at present chiefly engaged in the mobocratic amusement of hanging Mr. Buddlecombe's straw effigy in chains during the day, and burning it at night. There were, however, ominous symptoms that this pastime was beginning to pall upon Puddleton's now vitiated taste, and that it craved for a more satisfying realism, of which this was only the shadow.

Warriner was to be Mr. Bolitho's guest for the day; and as the two drove together in a fly to the latter's residence, through the streets of Puddleton, knots of sulky operatives, who had either not been to bed all night, or had woken up from their drunken slumbers before their brethren, were gathered at the corners doggedly nursing their wrongs until the opening of the public-houses would furnish them with a more potent incentive than words.

Mr. Bolitho's return was welcomed with the wildest joy by his entire household, whose principal duties during the last fortnight had consisted in dragging the

neighbouring horse-ponds for their beloved master's remains. The old housekeeper wept tears of joy, and then suddenly changing her tactics rated him soundly for the fright and grief he had occasioned them.

One of the very first acts of Mr. Bolitho on arriving at home was to despatch a note to Florence, telling her of his return and asking her to come over at her earliest convenience.

A bath and a change of clothes, and Mr. Bolitho and Warriner sat down to breakfast. They had scarcely commenced when the former jumped up from his seat and rushed out of the room, exclaiming,

'There she is, coming along like a little fairy, bless her! You wait here, Warriner, my dear boy, until I bring her in. I must break the awful intelligence of your return.'

As Mr. Bolitho spoke Warriner saw through the window Florence hurriedly walking along the by-path which the reader has already been told connected Mr. Bolitho's house with Mr. Buddlecombe's. With a swelling heart he gazed upon the slight graceful form, and then, as she came nearer, upon the sad pale little face. As she beheld her old friend advancing to meet her, she rushed forward and threw her arms round his neck. Then old Bolitho, as he bent fondly over her, whispered something in her ear which made her break away from him, and gaze up into his face with a kind of bewildered joy. In the embrace her hat had fallen back, so that Warriner enjoyed the fullest view of what was, of course, in his opinion, the fairest and sweetest object under the sun.

In a few moments Algernon Warriner and Florence were face to face, and, as the reader may

imagine, he had even less difficulty than he had with old Bolitho in proving his loyalty.

Later on in the morning Mrs. Buddlecombe, to whom the joyful tidings of Mr. Bolitho's return with Algernon had been communicated by Florry, came over, and was good enough to rescind her bad opinion of her daughter's lover.

But though Florence, Mrs. Buddlecombe, and Mr. Bolitho were quite satisfied with Warriner's own refutation of Sir Tripton's calumny, he was not the man to allow such a matter to rest until it had been thoroughly sifted. The following day he proceeded to Belford Court, bearded Sir Tripton in his own hall, and elicited a written as well as a verbal confession from the old dandy, who, to do him justice, when he found the unexpected turn affairs had taken, was most anxious to set matters right, and did not spare himself in his efforts to make the *amende honorable*. He returned at once to Puddleton, and the following day Florence received a long letter from Agatha Madingley, full of love and congratulations.

There was yet one tangled knot which had not been unravelled—the disappearance of Algernon's letters. But by a tacit understanding between the two the subject was allowed to drop. Florry, for her father's sake, kept her suspicion to herself; and Algernon Warriner, for her sake, was equally reticent.

A review of the situation now disclosed to the lovers that the course of their true love, as far as it was influenced by Mr. Buddlecombe, had taken a retrogressive turn. It was a case of 'as you were.' Under the circumstances it was agreed that they had 'better bide a wee' before reopening

negotiations with him; but that in the mean time they would be ready to avail themselves of any favourable opportunity that might present itself.

The opportunity came rather quicker than they expected or could have hoped for.

CHAPTER XXI.

PUDDLETON became more and more demoralised. Tremendous capital was made by the professional agitators out of the death resulting from Mr. Buddlecombe's by no means premature order to the local police to fire, and the worshipful gentleman was held up to the scorn and obloquy of the mob. They called him a murderer, but in their eyes he was guilty of a still more heinous crime than murder—he was a man in authority over them.

Three nights after Algernon Warriner's return from Belford Court, Mr. Buddlecombe, who had sat up long after the household had retired, was in his dressing-room, divesting himself of his clothes and wishing with all his heart that he could as easily divest himself of the cares and troubles, public and private, when Spigot rushed in terror-stricken.

'O your worship, for the love of God send for the soldiers!' implored the trembling and pallid Spigot. 'The house is surrounded, your worship, and we shall all be murdered in our worshipful beds—leastways, I mean—O, send for the soldiers, your worship!'

'Surrounded! Bless my soul!' faltered Mr. Buddlecombe, standing aghast in the very airiest of costumes. 'Are you sure you haven't been dreaming?' he continued, as he walked to the window, and, drawing the blind a

little aside, peered cautiously into the darkness.

The action was detected by a portion of the mob outside, and a roar of anger and derision greeted the appearance of Mr. Buddlecombe, whose form had been recognised for some time by means of the tell-tale shadow on the window-blind as he had undressed himself. Simultaneously with the roar some combustible material was thrown on to a bonfire which had just been ignited, and a lurid glare lit up the scene.

Now we all know that 'man, proud man, dressed in a little brief authority,' is overweeningly fond of posing in public; but when merely dressed in a little brief garment he is not so proud, and a great deal of this foolish hankering for public display deserts him. To humility, therefore, or to modesty, rather than to base fear, let us generously attribute the wondrous agility with which Mr. Buddlecombe withdrew from the public gaze.

The roar of voices and the flare of the bonfire speedily aroused the entire household, and in a few minutes the family and the servants were assembled in a terrified group in the drawing-room. Mr. Buddlecombe, now completely dressed, felt that some vigorous course of action devolved upon him. Summoning up all his fortitude he opened one of the windows, and while Mrs. Buddlecombe dragged at one coat-tail and Florry at the other, he demanded of the mob in a loud tone of voice what their object was.

Yells and groans and a shower of burning brands plucked from the bonfire constituted the emphatic rejoinder of the many-headed. A few of the fiery missiles fell into the room amongst the women-servants, creating dire confusion in the petticoated ranks, and

eliciting a shrill chorus of terrified shrieks. Mr. Buddlecombe at once saw the futility of any further attempt to reason with his besiegers, and there was nothing to do but to watch their proceedings and anxiously wait for succour.

The bonfire now received fresh fuel in the shape of Mr. Buddlecombe's brougham and Florence's pony-carriage, which had been broken up into firewood; and round the fierce blaze men, mad with drink, danced, and yelled imprecations not only on Mr. Buddlecombe, but also on the members of his family. A new attraction, however, soon presented itself, and this was the appearance on the scene of Mr. Buddlecombe's barouche, containing the stuffed effigy of its owner. Amidst drunken laughter and yells the carriage was dragged and pushed on to the blazing pile. All this time Spigot was going about the house in a frenzy of terror, wringing his hands and imploring every one he met to send for the soldiers. Most fervently did Mr. Buddlecombe wish that he could send to the barracks for assistance, but no one in the house dared show his face outside.

A body of police soon appeared, but they were in a ridiculous minority, and such as were not brutally injured were speedily overpowered and driven off the field.

As yet no attempt to break into the house had been made, but suddenly a thumping at a door at the back of the premises chilled the women with terror.

'Who's there?' demanded Mr. Buddlecombe from a window immediately above.

'Is that you, Buddle? It's Bolitho, your old friend, Joe Bolitho,' was the cheering response.

As quickly as eager hands could

do it the door was unbarred, and Mr. Bolitho admitted.

'Buddle, old friend,' said the hearty old gentleman, as he grasped Mr. Buddlecombe's hand, 'what a piece of business this is! We must stick by each other in the hour of danger, for we must not forget that we were boys together!'

'No, no, of course we mustn't,' responded Mr. Buddlecombe, with emotion. 'Bless you, Joe; bless you, my dear old friend.'

'I've sent a mounted messenger to the barracks for assistance.'

'Thank God!' said Mr. Buddlecombe.

The tones of Mr. Bolitho's voice having reached the remaining inmates there was a general rush towards him.

'Ah, my darlings, don't be frightened,' said the old fellow, as he put one arm round Mrs. Buddlecombe and another round Florence, while the women-servants hung about him, half laughing, half crying. 'Don't be frightened, we'll soon have the red-coats here. Come along, let me speak to this drunken rabble. It makes one's heart bleed to think that they are Englishmen.'

In spite of entreaties not to expose himself, Mr. Bolitho insisted on stepping out on to a balcony over the front-door portico. His appearance was greeted with a great many cries of 'It's old Joe!' 'Give old Joe Bolitho a hearing, lads!' But this view was not in accord with the general temper of the savage mob, and a shower of missiles, one of which knocked his hat off, whizzed about the plucky old fellow's white head. Gallantly he stood his ground, in the hope that their ebullitions would subside in a few moments, and afford him an opportunity of reasoning with his misguided countrymen; but in

his own goodness of heart he could not fathom the dastardly brutality of an infuriated mob. A horrible dull thud, a spurt of blood, and down went the white head. Stunned and bleeding, the old fellow was dragged into the house amidst the screams of the women.

They were hanging over him, wiping the blood off the white hair, when, with a cheering effect on their drooping spirits, a bugle up in barracks was heard to ring out loud and clear.

'Thank God!' exclaimed Mr. Buddlecombe. 'Joe Bolitho's messenger has raised the alarm at the barracks, and we shall soon have the military.'

In the midst of her terror Mrs. Buddlecombe could not repress a significant glance at her husband, as much as to say that a change had indeed come o'er the spirit of his dream.

A quarter of an hour of intense suspense ensued. The mob now turned their attention to firing the house itself. Combustible materials were placed wherever any wood-work in the building offered a good starting-point for the flames, and different points were already ignited, when a cry arose that the soldiers were coming. In a few moments a company of soldiers were distinctly seen, by the light of the bonfire,

coming along the avenue at a steady swinging double, with arms trailed. Reckless with drink and excitement the mob surged towards the compact little body of men, with the evident intention of resisting its progress.

'Steady, men! A steady double, and don't lose your touch of each other,' shouted the officer in command.

'O, it's Algy's voice!' exclaimed Florence. 'It is Algy coming to save us!'

'Noble young fellow, so it is!' said Mr. Buddlecombe.

The reader can imagine the rest: how Algernon Warriner—for of course Florence's ears had not deceived her—quickly dispersed the mob with his company; and how Mr. Buddlecombe, his heart overflowing with gratitude, bitterly repented him of the course he had taken at Lady Cecilia's instigation. Furthermore the reader will be pleased to hear that with regard to this transaction Mr. Buddlecombe made a clean breast of it to his wife, and all jealous doubts being thus removed from the good lady's bosom a complete and lasting reconciliation ensued. Old Bolitho very soon recovered from his wound, to be as hearty and jovial and kind as ever.

THE END.
